

*Fog of Myths and Legends Series-1*

*The Essays  
throwing new light on*

THE GANDHARVAS,  
THE APSARASES  
THE YAKSHAS AND  
THE KINNARAS

*N. G. Tavakar*

TAVKAR PRAKASHAN





GANDHARVAS AS CARVED ON A SLATE AT NAGARJUNAKONDA IN GUNTUR DISTRICT

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## *Preface*

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The four essays included in this book originally form the sub-sections of the third chapter of my proposed book "EVOLUTION OF THE SERPENT CULT, RE-ORIENTATION OF THE MYTHS AND LEGENDS ABOUT THE NAGAS, AND THE NAGAS IN HISTORICAL PERIOD". The caption of the third chapter of this book will be "FOG OF MYTHS AND LEGENDS", and it will include various subsections of which those of the GANDHARVAS, the APSARASES, the YAKSHAS and the KINNARAS will be the four. Most of these beings are regarded as semi-divine, or as superior types of human beings, the best and the greatest of them being the NAGAS, and the lowest of them being the RAKSHASAS.

The Nagas, the Yakshas, the Gandharvas, the Apsarases and the Kinnaras are constantly mentioned together in the Epics, the Puranas and in other literary works, especially when any comparison is to be shown; and they always act as STANDARD OF COMPARISON, the object of comparison being some other great and conspicuous human being, and the common quality being either 'beauty', or 'sweet voice,' or 'skill in music or dancing', and other similar things.

While collecting material for my proposed work on the NAGAS, I found that many things were said about the NAGAS in the Vedas and the Brahmanas, and in the Epics and the Puranas, but very little was said about the Gandharvas, the Apsarases and the Kinnaras; only very very brief and scanty information was everywhere scattered; but one thing was evident and that was this that the association of their name with that of the Nagas or with those of such other beings, was constant. What was repeatedly said about the Gandharvas and the Kinnaras was that they were the singers, and the Apsarases were the dancers in the celestial court or temples; their skill in music, their sweet voice and their beauty were very highly praised; but there was lack of definite information about their home, about their real



status in the society, or about their other activities. This fact urged me to glean more information about them from all possible sources and to try to bring about a detailed available history of these people. These Essays are the result of that labour.

The study about these people has convinced me that much of the information about these people as supplied by the Epics and the Puranas is based purely on imagination and fancy; and the later generation (even including our present one) has fully relied on that information and has taken it as a fact. My findings about these people however are in total contrast to what we know about them; for the GANDHARVAS were no longer common singers, but were mighty kings, guardians of the world, and were highly respected by sages as superior persons; they were even worthy of sitting in company with great gods like Indra and Varuna at a sacrifice. They were of course the masters of the Science of Music; and they were intimately connected with the affairs of human beings, in their daily life as during their studies and marriages. Similarly were the lovely and delicate APSARASES, great queens and princesses, and no more celestial prostitutes as so often represented; but they were respectful ladies, highly honoured by sages, and intimately connected with human affairs even like the Gandharvas.

And nothing definite was equally known about the KINNARAS too, and that is why they have been represented sometimes by some authors as '*horse-headed*', by others, as '*horse-bodied*', and still by others as '*beings resembling birds*'. None of the writers knew of their real character or of their origin; they also did not know whence they came and how they occupied an honourable place among the Hindu deities. The information given in the essay will throw a good deal of light on the 'home' and 'character' of the Kinnaras.

Whatever I have said about these people is supported by authorities which I have quoted copiously in the 'Notes' given at the end of each essay.

All this labour, started after my retirement from strenuous school work both of teaching and administration for 42 years—and



that too single-handed, without any help from proper authority on the subject to guide me,— is likely to have some defects and draw-backs. The learned readers are requested to point them out so that they may be corrected in the next edition whenever it comes out.

I am greatly indebted to the authorities of the Gandhi Smriti Library, Bhavanagar (Gujarat), for supplying me rare books required for the study during my stay there for some years.

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*Bali Pratipada*, 20-10-1971.

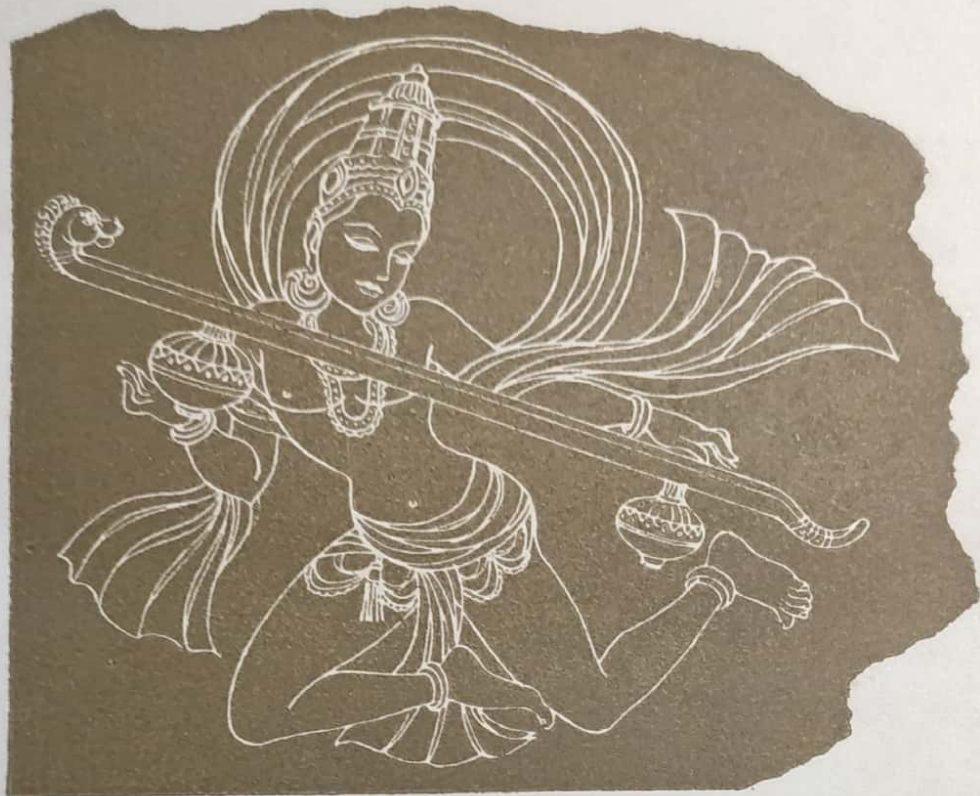


## A LIST OF ABBREVIATIONS USED IN THE NOTES FOR THE AUTHORITIES QUOTED

- |    |                |     |   |
|----|----------------|-----|---|
| 1  | A. G.          | ... | The Archaeology of Gujarat (H. D. Sankalia)                                     |
| 2  | A. I.          | ... | Ancient India (Mc. Crindle)   |
| 3  | A. I. A.       | ... | The Art of Indian Asia (H. Zimmer)  |
| 4  | Ait. Br.       | ... | Aitareya Brahmana   |
| 5  | Ak.            | ... | Amarakosha  |
| 6  | A. Pu.         | ... | Agni Purana   |
| 7  | Av.            | ... | Atharva Veda  |
| 8  | B.             | ... | Bible   |
| 9  | B. C. L. C.    | ... | B. C. Law Com. Volume, Poona  |
| 10 | Bg.            | ... | Bhagavadgita  |
| 11 | Bh. Pu.        | ... | Bhagavata Purana  |
| 12 | Br. A. Up.     | ... | Brihad Aranyaka Upanishad   |
| 13 | D. C. I.       | ... | Christian Iconography (Didron)  |
| 14 | Dr. Gr. S.     | ... | Drahyayana Grihya Sutra   |
| 15 | E. H. C. K.    | ... | Early History and Culture of Kashmir<br>(Dr. S. C. Ray)                         |
| 16 | E. H. I.       | ... | Elements of Hindu Iconography (T. A. G. Rao)                                    |
| 17 | E. M. L. I.    | ... | Epics, Myths and Legends of India (P. Thomas)                                   |
| 18 | E. R. E.       | ... | Encyclopaedia of Religion and Ethics, Vol. XII<br>(James Hastings)              |
| 19 | F. I. A.       | ... | The Flowering of Indian Art (Radhakamal<br>Mukerji)                             |
| 20 | G. K. I. I.    | ... | Gandharvas and Kinnaras in Indian Iconography<br>(Vidharatna R. S. Panchamukhi) |
| 21 | Go. Gr. S.     | ... | Gobhila Grihya Sutra  |
| 22 | G. N. B.       | ... | The Gods of Northern Buddhism (Alice Getty)                                     |
| 23 | H. F. A. I. C. | ... | A History of Fine Art in India and Ceylon<br>(V. A. Smith)                      |
| 24 | H. G.          | ... | Himalayan Gazette, Vol. I   |
| 25 | H. Gr. S.      | ... | Hiranyakeshi Grihya Sutra   |
| 26 | H. I. I. A.    | ... | History of Indian and Indonesian Art<br>(A. K. Coomarswamy)                     |
| 27 | I. A. H.       | ... | Indian Art and Heritage (Ganguly and Goswami)                                   |



28	I. C.	...	Indus Civilization (Mackay)
29	J. Br.	...	Jaiminiya Brahmana
30	J. Up. Br.	...	Jaiminiya Upanishad Brahmana
31	K.	...	Kadambari (Bana)
32	Kau. Br.	...	Kaushitaki Brahmana
33	K. (Ku.)	...	Kalidasa : Kumara Sambhava
34	K. (M.)	...	Kalidasa : Meghaduta
35	K. (R.)	...	Kalidasa : Raghuvamsha
36	K. Up.	...	Kena Upanishad
37	K. (Vi)	...	Kalidasa : Vikramorvashiya
38	L. B.	...	Life of the Buddha (W. W. Rock hill)
39	M. Bh.	...	Maha Bharata
40	M. Br.	...	Mantra Brahmana
41	M. Pu.	...	Matsya Purana
42	M. S.	...	Maitrayani Samhita
43	M. S. A.	...	Mediaeval Sinhalese Art (A. K. Coomarswamy)
44	M. Sv.	...	Magha : Shishupala Vadha
45	Mah. V.	...	Mahavansa
46	Man.	...	Manasra
47	N. M. Pu.	...	Nila Mata Purana
48	P. Pu.	...	Padma Purana
49	P. K. M. J.	...	Pada Kushala Manava Jataka (No. 432)
50	P. V. Br.	...	Pancha Vimshati Brahmana
51	Ram.	...	Ramayana
52	R. I. P.	...	Revealing India's Past (The Indian Society, London)
53	R. P. V. U.	...	Religion and Philosophy of the Veda and Upanishads (A. B. Keith)
54	Rv.	...	Rigveda
55	S. C.	...	Story of Civilization (Will Durant, Hindi Tr. by Vyas)
56	S. Gr. S.	...	Shankhayana Grihya Sutra
57	S. I. G. G.	...	South Indian Gods and Goddesses (H. K. Shastri)
58	S. I. S.	...	Survey of Indian Sculpture (S. K. Saraswati)
59	Sk. Pu.	...	Skanda Purana
60	S. P. Br.	...	Shata Patha Brahmana
61	T. Ar.	...	Taittiriya Aranyaka
62	T. Br.	...	Taittiriya Brahmana
63	T. S.	...	Taittiriya Samhita
64	T. Up.	...	Taittiriya Upanishad
65	UR.	...	UR of the Chaldees (Sir L. Woolley)
66	V. D. Pu.	...	Vishnu Dharmottara Purana
67	V. Pu.	...	Vishnu Purana
68	Vach.	...	Vachaspatya
69	W. B.	...	The Way of the Buddha (Govt. of India Publication)
70	Yv.	...	Yajurveda
71	Yn.	...	Yasna



I

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*The Gandharvas*  
A WARRIOR RACE



## *The Gandharvas*

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### ☐ DEVAS, GANDHARVAS, MANAVAS AND ASURAS

Among the theological accounts found in the mythologies and traditions of the proto-Vedic, Vedic, and post-Vedic periods, we come across beings known as Devas, Asuras, Nagas, Gandharvas, Yakshas, Apsarases, Rakshasas, Manavas and so on. Of these the Devas or gods are shown as belonging to 'Dyaus' or heaven, the Manavas or men as belonging to 'Prithvi' or the earth, and the Asuras and the Nagas as belonging to 'Patala' or the nether world. The Gandharvas and the Apsarases belonged to the 'Antariksha' or the region midway between the heaven and the earth. The conception about the 'Devas' is very vague and complicated; yet they are spirits of nature having their control over all natural phenomena including sea, rain, wind, storm, lightning and such other things. They show favour to their worshippers and give all sorts of prosperity to them; or they show their wrath by sending diseases or other disasters on those who worship them not. They are said to possess superior strength. They enjoy a very happy life. They come to help human beings whenever prayed for. Their greatest enemies are said to be the Asuras, the Nagas or Ahis and the Rakshasas. The Devas or the gods however lived in the uppermost region, while the Asuras, the Nagas and the Rakshasas lived in the lowermost region.

The Aryans who were the worshippers of the Devas are known as the Manavas or men; and the earth on which they lived was far below the heaven, but above the region of the Patala.

### ☐ A VAGUE CONCEPTION ABOUT 'THE HEAVEN', 'THE MID - REGION' AND 'THE NETHER WORLD'

In all the mythologies of the world the idea about heaven is invariably vague; it is shown to have been situated somewhere at a very high place; it may be the Mt. Olympus or the Mt. Meru.

or the Mt. Kailasa; but it is never shown as high among or beyond the stars. The Mid-region is somewhere below this heaven; it is connected with clouds and mountains. The conception about the mid-region might be that it is the Himalayan region; the Gandharvas, the Apsarases, the Siddhas and similar other beings live in this region. The conception about the Nether world or Patala is also very vague; it is considered to be far far away from the heaven and below the earth; it is a place full of bliss; there is material prosperity of every kind; it is connected with the sea; the Nagas and the Asuras live there.

#### □ THE AHIS AND THE GANDHARVAS : BOTH PROTO - VEDIC BEINGS

In the Rigveda and in the later Samhitas we hear much about the *Ahis* and their counterparts; we also read about their conflicts with the gods of the Aryans. These *Ahis* are variously named as *Asuras*, *Vritras*, *Nagas*, *Dasas*, *Dasyus* and *Danavas*. They are described as **very powerful** beings possessing magic power. They are shown as rich, enjoying all sorts of pleasures, having very strong forts, and possessing the power of reviving their dead. The gods found it very hard to vanquish them; they were often defeated by the *Asuras* and hence they often employed questionable means to gain their end; they now and then refreshed themselves with a drink called the *Soma* Drink. There are so many things told about the *Asuras*; but about the *Gandharvas* and the *Apsarases* we get very scanty information. The earliest reference we get about them is from the *Rigveda*. They are mentioned in the *Rigveda* for more than a dozen times. We thus find both the *Ahis* or *Asuras* and the *Gandharvas* as belonging to the proto-Vedic period.

#### □ THE GANDHARVAS AND THEIR ACTIVITIES

As we proceed from the *Rigvedic* to the later period of the other *Vedas*, and to a still later period of the *Brahmanas* and the *Puranas*, we come to know more and more about the *Gandharvas*. We know the region and the nature of their activities, the region where they had their home, their constant association with the gods, with the human beings and with the *Apsarases*, their pers-



onal features, their particular responsibility of guarding Soma, their knowledge of some secret writing, their special attachment to womanfolk, their proficiency in music and of many other things.

#### ☐ THE GANDHARVAS CONFINED WITHIN A LIMITED REGION OF THE EARTH

The mythologies and traditions about the 'serpents' (Ahis, Nagas) are found in different parts of the world; those of the Gandharvas are restricted to a small area of the earth; and that area is bounded by the sea and the mountains; it may be the land known as the Gandhara country as we shall see further.

#### ☒ THE GANDHARVAS ORIGINALLY THE ENEMIES OF THE ARYANS AND THEIR GODS

That the Gandharvas were originally hostile towards the Aryans and their gods can be seen from the Rigveda itself (\*1). There we are told that there was a fight between the Gandharva Krishanu and an eagle. The eagle had come to rob Soma which was guarded by the Gandharva. In all the post-Vedic literary works the Gandharvas have been shown as having a special responsibility of guarding Soma. Now the eagle represents the 'solar cult', the cult of the Aryans. If Soma had belonged to the Aryans, Krishanu would have been an Aryan too, and he would not have objected the eagle from taking the Soma; nor would there have been any fight for it; the matter would have been reported to the higher authority; and Krishanu would not have to use an arrow against the eagle. The fight between two rival races or tribes for some 'mead' has been recorded in all the mythologies of the northern European countries; so do we find it in the Indian mythology also. Thus the fight between the Gandharva and the eagle too must be between two rival tribes.

In certain passages of the Rigveda (\*2) again we meet the Gandharva looked upon with a hostile aspect. It therefore clearly shows that the Gandharvas were not the Aryans. This point is made clear when we see that the Gandharvas are neither included among the gods of the Aryans nor among the Aryans themselves.

They were thus non-Aryans. And if the land of the Gandharvas be the region known by the name of the Gandhara i.e. the land within the bounds of Iran and the Himalayan region, the Aryans who came to the Land of the Bharatas had passed through the land of the Gandharvas, and hence were intruders on their land, and were naturally their enemies. But the Gandharvas might have become the friends of the Aryans afterwards.

#### □ THE GANDHARVAS : A PEOPLE OF MILITARY CLASS : THEIR ACTIVITIES AND THEIR PERSONAL FEATURES

The Gandharvas have been described as the guardians of Soma and as great archers, qualities belonging to a person of the military class. The duty of a Kshatriya is to guard and give protection from harm; and this is the duty the Gandharvas are entrusted with.

The Gandharvas have been actually mentioned as kings both by the Vedic and the Puranic literature. The Atharva Veda (\*3) refers to the Gandharvas as the lords of the world i. e. the earth. The Kau. Br. (\*4) describes them as the Commissioners of water, indicating thereby that they had control over the sea also.

According to the Buddhist tradition (\*5), among the four Dikpalas or the Guardians of the Quarters, Gandharva Dhritarashtra is one. The Vishnu Purana (\*6) refers to 12 Gandharva kings of whom Dhritarashtra is one.

As men of the military class the Gandharvas are described as of 'comely' appearance and of 'noble' features(\*7). Our attention is particularly drawn by the Rigveda (\*8) to their waving hair. That they are mentioned in the Atharva Veda (\*9) as being 'shaggy' and looking like 'apes', is in a different context altogether. Bana's Kadambari mentions great Gandharva kings, viz. Chitraratha, Hansa and Vishvasu. The Gandharvas are credited with possessing a divine scent.

Gandharva Chitraratha has been mentioned in the Bhagavad-geeta too (\*10). There he is said to possess a major portion of the divine quality, and the Almighty God identifies him with Himself.



The Gandharvas have often been described as enjoying a royal life and engaged in royal games like dice, gambling etc. They are also shown in the company of women; Gandharva Urnayu has been shown in the company of the Apsarases enjoying a swing (\*11).

As members of the Kshatriya community the Gandharvas are shown as well-educated. This is clearly shown in the well-known episode of Vak: the gods used various means to get the possession of Soma; they even showed inducements to the Gandharvas by sending a woman to them and thus trying to allure their mind; the story of Vak in this connection is well known in the Samhitas and the Brahmanas (\*12). Vak was a woman; she had promised gods that she would be ready to go to the Gandharvas and secure Soma from them, since she was sure that they would part with it in her exchange. She had also told gods that she would go back to them. Now it is shown that both the Gandharvas and the gods vie to win over Vak; the Gandharvas are described as reciting the Vedas whereas the gods simply sing and dance before her and thus win her. She is attracted more by music and dance than by the recitation of the Vedas. It is here that we learn that the Gandharvas were well read in the Vedic studies.

The Gandharvas have been credited with having a thorough knowledge of and mastery over the Science of music; and the Gandharva Veda, a work on music, is known after them.

We learn from the Grihya Sutras (\*13) that in all the ancient schools teaching the study of the Vedas, a student had to pray to the Gandharvas and the Apsarases to give him intellectual capacity and insight in the study, as also the divine and human scent and splendour that they possessed. This was done at the time of the initiation ceremony and also at the close of the Vedic studies. In the Atharva Veda (14) the Gandharvas are described as worthy of salutations and as possessors of good things.

As Kshatriyas the Gandharvas are often shown connected with the sacrifices and various minor sacrificial rites; even in the Rig-veda (\*15) itself they are shown as being present in the sacrifices in which both Indra and Varuna were present. It has already



been shown above that they were connected with marriage rites. The Brahmanas (\*16) refer to a rite in which the priest points at a young man and a young maiden present, whereas he means to indicate not those persons but the Gandharva and the Apsaras.

A Grihya Sutra says that they are (\*17) besought to bestow progeny.

That the Gandharvas were conversant with a special type of sacrifice by means of which they could convert a human being to the fold of the Gandharvas, is illustrated in the story of Urvashi and Pururavas. Urvashi tells Pururavas that she will meet him a year after when the Gandharvas convert him and make him a Gandharva by performing a special sacrifice.

#### □ THE GANDHARVAS AND SOMA

That the Gandharvas were considered as the Guardians of Soma has already been mentioned before. In the Rigveda there are very few references about the Gandharvas, perhaps because the Rigvedic sages had very little personal knowledge about them; while the Aryans were making their move through the Land of the Gandharvas on their way to the Land of the Bharatas, our present India, they were not in a position to get themselves fully acquainted with the inhabitants there; and this accounts for the paucity of information about these people. In the Atharva Veda (\*18) the Gandharva is described as 'Amritasya Vidvan' - one knowing Amrita or Soma, as also its hidden place. The Aitareya Brahmana (\*19) describes how the gods wanted Soma and how they employed Vak to get it from the Gandharva.

The Kau. Br. (\*20) also mentions that the Gandharvas were the guardians of Soma. The S. P. Br., the Mait. Sam. and the Tai. Sam. (\*21) have given a lot about the VAK legend.

The Iranian mythology too tells us how the 'Haoma' or Soma was obtained from the 'Gandareva'. In the Avesta we meet with one Gandareva who dwells in the sea and is defeated by Keresaspa; this Gandareva is identified with the Gandharva of the Veda. In the Avesta the account of this 'Haoma' is given in detail and



there this Haoma is shown as a plant growing on the mountains; it is watered by the rains of heaven and is brought by an eagle who guards it; in the Avesta the eagle or the hawk is named Keresani (\*22).

#### □ THE HOME OF THE GANDHARVAS

The Rigveda refers to the residence of the Gandharvas as being in the 'Antariksha' i.e. the mid-region between Akasha and Prithvi (\*23); and that was their 'Dhruva-pada', a place that was their own. That place was resorted to by the 'wise' (vipra), perhaps for meditation. Water (perhaps in its liquid form) was scarce there; so that it was to be used as if it were 'ghee'. This last statement of the Rigveda can be interpreted in two ways viz. (1) that the water was scarce there as ghee is, and (2) water was in a frozen state, and it was as thick as ghee generally is. The latter interpretation is more plausible as it is the Himalayas that are spoken about and where the water is often in a frozen condition. That the Soma is connected with mountains and the Gandharvas guarded it there, and had their residence in the mid-region, all this goes to show clearly that the home of the Gandharvas was also there i. e. on the Himalayas.

If the place of the Aryan gods was in high heaven and that of men on the earth, the region between the two was naturally the mountainous region. The high heaven probably indicates the uppermost part of the earth as the Mt. Olympus was considered in the Greek mythology and the Mt. Meru and the Mt. Kailasa in the Indian mythology. The Gandharvas have been placed in the Himalayan region by the post-vedic and the classical literary works too as will be seen from below.

It is Bana of the 7th century A. D. who in his Kadambari gives a detailed account about the Gandharvas, the Apsarases and about their home. The story of that famous masterpiece of the Sanskrit language, is itself based on the life of the Gandharvas and the Apsarases. Though the subject-matter of the book is all based on imagination, there is a good deal of matter that is derived from the Vedic literature, from the Puranas and from oral traditions current at the time. This book definitely declares that

the Mt. Hemakuta, the Varsha Parvata, was the abode of the Gandharvas. It also gives the names of some mighty Gandharva kings ruling over there. They are credited with having created beautiful lakes and attractive gardens, even as the Nagas of yore did in Kashmere.

Vishnu Purana (\*24) assigns Kimpurusha as the abode of the Gandharvas; and it is said to be in the second division of Jambu-Dweepa, the first division being Bharata; and beyond it, is Kimpurusha; and the Mt. Hema Kuta and the Mt. Himavan are to the south of the Mt. Meru. We are not in a position to get the exact geographical position of this region as described in these ancient books; and we have no knowledge if Iran, Afghanistan, Makran etc. were included in this Kimpurusha region; but there were mighty Gandharva kings ruling somewhere in this land is vouchsafed by later literary works. And we do feel that this land must be the Gandhara country which also included in it Kashmere and other adjoining countries.

Vishnu Purana (\*25) again records that Bharata, the brother of Rama, who wanted to conquer the country of the Gandharvas had a long war with them, and in it some 300,000,00 fierce Gandharvas were killed; so they must have occupied a very extensive region wherever they lived.

Mention is often made of the *Gandharva Loka* (\*26) in various Brahmanas, Puranas and in the classical literature; so the Gandharvas were not limited to a small strip of land is clear. The Atharva Veda also calls them 'the lords of the World' (\*27).

( But the Atharva Veda and the later literary works also assign the 'sea' as their home; the Atharva Veda says that the 'Samudra' is the abode of the Apsarases and the Gandharvas lived with them. The Kau. Br. (\*28) mentions the Gandharvas as the 'Commissioners' in the waters, meaning the waters of the sea. Thus the land of the Gandharvas was extended right from the high Himalayan mountains to the sea, and this was naturally the land bordering on the Gulf of Iran; and this whole area thus included countries like Elam, Iran, Baluchistan, Afghanistan, and Kashmere. Now the ancient land of Gandhara which was so very well



known in the ancient history of India and which included many of these countries under its fold, might probably have been the land of the Gandharvas as the very name Gandharva suggests; *Gandhara-van* are the *Gandharvas*. This Gandhara did include Kashmere at one time and it was through this Gandhara that travellers entered the valley of Kashmere (\*29). According to an ancient geographer of the 6th century B. C. 'Kaspapyros' was a city of the Gandarians; and 'Kaspapyros' was the name of Kashmere according to scholars like Lassen, Humboldt and others (\*30). It was really *Kashyapa Pura* of which Kaspapyros is a corrupt form. The ancient writers used the word 'pura' for a 'city' and the 'country' as can be seen from the words 'Patala-pura' and 'Bhogavati-pura'. It is a well known fact that Kashyapa was responsible for making the valley of Kashmere habitable and also a paradise as recorded by *Neelamata Purana* and *Rajatarangini*, famous ancient works dealing with the ancient history of Kashmere.

In Kashmere there are well known places having the name of Gandharva such as *Gandarabala*. Thus the region occupied by the Gandharvas was very extensive. The original history of the Gandharvas was altogether forgotten, since these people belonged to very very ancient period, even to the proto-Vedic period; and whatever was told about them was through oral traditions only. The same case might be cited about the proto-Vedic Ahis or Nagas. Vague myths and traditions were woven round their names. We have only broken threads before us and out of them we have to weave a nice fabric, a readable history of these people.

#### □ THE GANDHARVAS AND THE APSARASES : THEIR CONNECTION WITH WATER

As in the Vedic literature so in the later literary works also the Gandharvas are shown as intimately connected with the Apsarases; and these Apsarases are, like the Nagas and the Naga-kanyas, also shown connected with water. The Gandharvas were of course connected with water since their very kingdom was bordering on the sea. It is not necessary therefore, as Keith says (\*31) that the Gandharvas were connected with water simply because they were connected with Soma.



### □ THE GANDHARVAS AND THEIR NUMBER

The Rigveda does not give any definite number of the Gandharva people, but uses the word 'Gandharva' either in the singular or in the plural number. This has led some scholars to think that the number of the Gandharvas was limited; but this is not so. The Atharva Veda (\*32) gives the number as 27 or 6333. We do not know how the authors of the Atharva Veda arrived at these odd numbers. Keith (\*33) connects the number 27 with the 27 planets or the Nakshatras; but the connection of the Gandharvas with the Nakshatras is nowhere given in the Samhitas or the Puranas. The Kadambari however says that there lived thousands of Gandharvas on the Hema Kuta Mountain alone; and according to Vishnu Purana, as already stated, 30,000,000 fierce Gandharvas were killed in their fight with Bharata. If there is any truth in these statements, the number mentioned in the Atharva Veda does not refer to the number of the Gandharva people but to their important families. These families were 6333 and the most prominent among them might have been 27. Vachaspatya enumerates 11 categories of the Gandharvas twice, but each time differently; and therein he gives the names Vishvavasu and Krishanu as names of Gandharva families and not as individual names. Again if there are references about the Gandharva Loka in the Brahmanas and the Upanishads; to populate that Loka the number of the Gandharvas must be not in thousands but in millions.

### □ PROMINENT GANDHARVAS MENTIONED BY NAME

The Bhagavad-Geeta (\*34) mentions the name of Chitra-ratha who has been described as one of the 'Vibhootis' of the Almighty God, i. e. possessing a portion of His great and extraordinary power. This fact itself shows that the Gandharvas were real human beings, and not some imaginary ones, or even powers representing forces of nature as believed by some scholars.

Kadambari too mentions the names of Gandharva kings among whom Chitra-ratha figures very prominently, he being one of the greatest Gandharva kings.



Dhritha-rashtra Gandharva has also been referred to by Vishnu Purana (\*35). This Purana gives a long list of prominent Gandharva kings who acted as Masadhikaris or the Lords of the months, waiting upon Surya or the Sun; and these are TUMBURU, NARADA, HABA, HUBU, VISHVA-VASU, UGRASENA, SURUCHI, CHITRA SENA, URNAYU, DHRTA-RASHTRA and SURYA VARCHAS. VISHVA VASU occurs twice; there might have been two separate Vishva Vasu Gandharva clans, or two separate kings belonging to the same Vishva Vasu clan. All the Gandharvas are accompanied by the Apsarases, their consorts.

The Kadambari also mentions other Gandharva kings besides CHITRA RATHA, and they are : HANSA, CHITRA SENA, TUMBURU and VISHVA VASU. This VISHVA VASU seems to be a very prominent king among the Gandharvas, since his name occurs at various places. Vishva vasu is connected with some marriage rites also.

Urnayu Gandharva is mentioned in the P. V. Br. (\*36) also.

#### □ THE GANDHARVAS AS PROGENITORS OF THE HUMAN RACE

According to the Hindu Cosmogonical view Manu became the Prajapati or the progenitor of the human race after the Great Deluge and that is why all the human beings are called 'manavas'. Manu was also the first sacrificer and the first man. Manu was the son of Vivaswat i. e. the sun.

But there is another account also by which men are said to have been born of Yama, the God of Death, and of his sister Yami. Yama is also the son of Vivaswat or the Sun (\*37).

The Avesta (\*38) has also preserved a record of this fact. But the Rigveda also speaks of Yama and Yami as being born of the Gandharva father and the Apsaras mother (\*39). So according to this view Yama as a Gandharva may be equated with Manu, and Vivaswat with the Gandharva. Gandharva has also been identified with the Sun by Sayana while explaining the meaning of the word Gandharva in the Rigveda (\*40).

### □ THE MYTHS AND LEGENDS ABOUT THE GANDHARVAS

Since the Gandharvas lived in the proto - Vedic age as already mentioned, they were far removed in time from the Vedic and the post-Vedic people. By this time their true and original history was mostly forgotten, nay, it was almost obliterated; the people in this later period had retained only some dim and hazy ideas and conceptions about these people. Myths and legends therefore gathered round their name. People began to look on them as demi-gods, or beings superior to them. They were also believed to be the spirits dwelling in trees. They were either hostile or friendly towards men. They moved among gods or they mixed with men. When with gods they entertained them with music; when with men, they associated themselves with them in their daily life: they were with them at the time of their studies right from the commencement to the end or completion of their studies. They were also with them at the time of their marriage ceremony. They however always moved in the company of the Apsarases, their consorts. These Apsarases were extremely lovely women. It was however a common belief that the Gandharvas were always after other beautiful women too and they were therefore dreaded by other people.

It was with all these conceptions that the legends and the myths about the Gandharvas were woven together. All the accounts about them restricted them to a particular region only and that region lay between the sea and the Himalaya Mountains.

(a) *The Gandharvas connected with trees* : At the earliest stages of our civilization the *trees* were considered divine and were worshipped all over the world, and one or the other god was shown connected with them. In the Indian mythology too the Gandharvas are shown connected with certain trees. The presence of the Gandharvas in these trees was felt right from the time of the Samhita period. According to the Tai. Sam. (\*41) they were connected with the Nyagrodha, the Udumbara, the Ashvattha and the Plaksha trees. These were the abodes both of the Gandharvas and the Apsarases. This idea of their habitation in trees was carried forward in the later period too; thus the Jains have assigned to these spirits the *tumburu* tree; and this is shown



by a symbol of the tree on their heads. The Atharva Veda (\*42) connects the Gandharvas with the Banyan and the Fig trees. They are begged to be propitious to the wedding party that passes by them.

(b) *Myths and traditions built on the assumption that the Gandharvas were the enemies of the Aryans* : The inimical nature of the Gandharvas towards the Aryans in the beginning was probably due to the fact that the Aryans were the intruders on the lands of the Gandharvas during their migration to India; it was therefore but natural that the Gandharvas should be unfriendly towards them. Now the Aryans that went to India carried with them this idea of bitterness for the Gandharvas, and recorded the same in their songs and prayers (\*43).

Another reason for this feeling was the fact that the Aryan gods wanted to rob the Gandharvas of their *soma* with the help of the eagle or Vak, or by other fraudulent means; and the Gandharvas had to raise their voice or arms against them (\*44). These were sufficient reasons for the enmity between the two.

(c) *The Gandharvas : Their Seductive Nature* : The Gandharvas were known as the husbands of the Apsarases; and these Apsarases were famous for their beauty, loveliness and their seductive manners; they were also proficient in many arts. The Gandharvas were always in their midst enjoying a life of happiness and bliss; and the measure of bliss that the Gandharvas enjoyed was believed to be 10,000 times more than that enjoyed by men (\*45). The Gandharvas like Urnayu were found in the company of Apsaras enjoying a happy time on swings (\*46). The Gandharvas have been described as having abundance of sexual pleasure (\*47). As always given to such pleasures they were fond of scents and scented articles; they also put on fragrant garments (\*48).

All the above ideas about the happiness of the Gandharvas led the Aryans believe that they were also after woman-folk; and that they tried to seduce them. The Gandharvas were therefore feared and hated too. The expressions of this fear can be found in the Atharva Veda where the Gandharvas are spoken of as if they were apes and donkeys and dragons (\*49). The aversion for the

Gandharvas seems clear since they are mentioned as 'shaggy' whereas the Rigveda (\*50) draws our special attention to their wavy hair.

Such Gandharvas were to be kept at a distance; and the Atharva-vedic sages point out to the *aja-shringi* plant by means of which they could drive away the dangerous Gandharvas. And there were some charms and amulets too which they had found; for these Gandharvas were to them Pishachas, Yatudhanas and Atrins, all dreadful demons. This unfriendly note about the Gandharvas is met with in the Atharva Veda many a time (\*51).

The Gandharvas have also been spoken of as possessing women, making them mad, or causing in them some sort of derangement or at least some mental excitement (\*52).

(d) *The Gandharva World* : The Gandharvas are said to have a separate world of their own; it was not on the earth, but was some where above, and far away from it. According to the Rigvedic conception it was somewhere between the heaven and the earth (\*53). A Muni is said to have been speeding along the winds on the path of the Apsarases and the Gandharvas. Yadnyavalkya says to Gargi (\*54) that the worlds of the sky are woven like warf and woof in the worlds of the Gandharvas, which are in their turn woven in the worlds of the Aditya or the sun. All this account was of course based on the pure imagination of the sages who did not know the real habitation of the Gandharvas.

And following this line of thought perhaps that the Gandharvas are often shown as flying in or moving through the sky or atmosphere; they are so represented in painting or plastic art.

(e) *The Gandharvas and the Sacrifice* : It has already been stated above that the Gandharvas were associated with certain religious rites. The Kshatriyas in ancient time were connected with greater sacrificial sessions, and even so were the Gandharvas connected with them even like the Nagas of yore; this is clearly shown in the Rigveda (\*55). But there is however a special reference about the Gandharvas wherein we are told that the Gandharvas were conversant with a particular form of sacrifice by means of which



they could convert a human being into a Gandharva. This fact is brought to light in the episode of Urvashi and Pururavas. Urvashi, the well known Apsaras, fell in love with Pururavas, and lived with him on certain conditions, one of which was broken and she left him. After a long period, however, she met him again and told him that she would be with him after a year when the Gandharvas will enable him to become one of themselves by producing a sacrificial fire in a certain way (\*56). The Gandharvas thus knew how to produce that sacrificial fire by particular way whereby they could change a mortal being and make him a Gandharva.

(f) *The Gandharvas as Musicians* : We have already described how the Gandharvas were mighty kings; and as such it was not at all probable in their case to have accepted any minor and degraded post or position, and least of all as singers in temples or abodes of gods. But it is the firm conviction of the general public that they were the singers in the court of gods; how can these ideas be reconciled? How did they become the musicians of the Aryan gods? This enigma can be unravelled as follows :

Even like the Nagas and the Naga-kanyas, the Gandharvas and the Apsaras were adept in the arts of Music and Dance. Music was considered as a very honourable subject of study in all high and noble families, especially in the case of princes and princesses. The Gandharvas had developed a particular liking for music and they were also the exponents of this art; they have at their credit a great encyclopaedic work on music popularly known as the "Gandharva Veda". The Skanda Purana (\*57) describes this work as 'all-lustrous'; music has the power of shedding joy all round.

It is possible that when the Aryans passed through the land of the Gandharvas, while on their way to India for a permanent settlement, they had bitter fights with the Gandharvas and who thus became their enemies; but realising their special merit in music the Aryans might have desired to have them as friends; the Aryans and the Gandharvas might have become friends in the later period; the Gandharvas might have accepted their gods as their own, and as such there was nothing degrading in their serv-

ing the Aryan gods and playing music before them. It should be remembered that the Gandharvas have never been mentioned as musicians before the Aryans. It was the writers of the later period who having no complete accounts about the Gandharvas before them but having only traditions about their acting as musicians before the Aryan gods, interpreted them as servants and musicians of the Aryan gods.

(g) *The Gandharvas as Devotees of Shiva* : Since the post-Vedic poets considered the Gandharvas as musicians of the gods, so the Buddhist poets and artists also took them as musicians waiting upon the Buddha on all auspicious occasions. They have been so represented in the poems, and in their sculptural and mural art. Pancha-shikha Gandharva and his retinue have been shown as acting as choristers to the Buddha.

But the cult of the Shiva worship was all popular throughout the Western and Southern Asia from the earliest time; the traces of this cult are found in Asia Minor, in Mesopotamia, and in Egypt, among the Indus Valley people, and throughout India and Kashmere. The Nandi or the Bull was popular throughout the world as a sacred animal; it was so among the Celts and Teutons, among the Cretans and among the Jews. In Asia Minor there is a wellknown Mt. *Taurus*, the meaning of which is the Mountain of the *Bull*.

The traces of the cult of Phallus worship, the cult of Trishula, the cult of Serpent worship, the cult of Moon worship, all connected with the worship of the God Shiva, are to be seen in most of these countries.

It was therefore but natural for the Gandharvas, even like the Nagas, to become the devotees of Shiva; and especially because the Gandharvas belonged to the Himalaya Mountains, the principal seat of Shiva worship.

In the Bhagavata Purana (\*58) we are told that the Gandharvas declare before Rudra that their duty to that god was to play on musical instruments and to dance and sing.



In the Kadambari we are told that the Gandharvas built Shiva temples.

There is a famous story about the Gandharva King Pushpadanta who was cursed because he had committed some breach in the worship of the God Shiva and so he was to be born on the earth. On this earth he composed a poem in praise of Shiva and he was liberated. His *Mahimna Stotra* is one of the most well known devotional songs in the Sanskrit language.

(h) *The Gandharva Vivaha* : The Atharva Veda (\*59) says that the Gandharvas were known for sexual enjoyment in abundance. They have been described as loving women (\*60); and they are always shown as associated with Apsarases. They were of course polygamous people being non-Aryan Kshatriyas. They therefore had many wives, and so they are naturally spoken of as voluptuous. They married women with whom they fell in love. They did not then observe any special form of marriage; their mutual love and consent were the sanctions for the same. In the age that followed such a type of marriage where only mutual love was recognised, was dubbed as the Gandharva type of marriage and was named as Gandharva Vivaha. No special ceremony or any sacrificial rite was necessary for such a marriage. Such forms of marriages were very popular in India at one time.

(i) *The Gandharva Nagari* : Since so much was said about the Gandharvas and their world, the people naturally expected the existence of their city, the capital of their kingdom. But as the Gandharva people were non-existent at the time of the compilation of the Vedas and the Brahmanas, their capital was also non-existent; it had only remained in name. The Gandharva Nagari therefore came to mean "a non-existent or an imaginary thing," a mirage, so to say.

(j) *The Gandharvas Braying Like Donkeys* : If the Gandharvas were great musicians, and the celestial musicians too, how is it that they are spoken of as 'braying like donkeys'? If their music was sweet and pleasing how can it be called discordant? This is a very pertinent question.

Now we know that even in our daily life and in our every day conversation we do use such paradoxical statements; this happens when we are irritated and are not in good mood. The same thing must have happened to irritate the sages who used such words for the Gandharvas. Some pupils studying the Gandharva Veda might have disturbed the sage of the Atharva Veda (\*61) while in his meditation; and the sage might have used the words in anger. A similar instance is found in the Rigveda (\*62) where there is a similarity shown between the frogs croaking and the Brahmanas reciting verses from their sacred texts. It is even like calling the fair Gandharvas 'apes' and speaking of their attractive hair as 'shaggy'.

(k) *The Gandharvas and a Secret Script* : The tradition makes the Gandharvas conversant with some secret script. This matter needs a thorough investigation. The Matsya Purana (\*63) states that the Gandharvas knew and were noted for a 'chitra lipi', a picture writing. There are references about this writing in the Padma Purana (\*64) and in the Maha Bharata too (\*65). It is Chitra Gupta who is popularly believed to have been conversant with some secret writing. He is supposed to be the personal secretary of Yama, the God of Death. Now Yama himself is spoken of as a Gandharva by the Rigveda itself (\*66); so it will not be wrong to take Chitra Gupta also to be a Gandharva.

Now the Gandharvas lived close to the land of the Assyrians and the Hittites who used the 'cuneiform' script for their writing; can we therefore say that the Gandharvas knew their script? Or did they know the INDUS VALLEY script? But this question requires a special treatment at the hands of the experts; again it cannot be solved unless the INDUS VALLEY script is correctly deciphered.

(l) *The Gandharvas in the Plastic and Mural arts of India* : It will be clear from the above account that the true history of the Gandharvas was totally forgotten; only one conception about them remained, and that was this that they were the celestial singers and drummers. As such they moved freely through the sky to perform their duty of attending upon the gods in heaven. With this main idea before the mind of the artist, whether a poet or a



painter or a sculptor, he tried to stretch his imagination and created the image of a Gandharva as his fancy directed him. Fanciful and fabulous sculptural forms are common in the Paharpur art.

Thus we find the flying figures of the Gandharvas in company of the celestial beings. It should be remembered that the Gandharvas are shown without wings, and yet they fly together with the Apsarases. It is from their attitude and from their feeling of weightlessness that we know that they are flying. Flying Gandharva couples with beautiful faces and rich ornaments can be seen in the temple architecture of our country.

In the Ajanta Cave No. 1, one can see a group of celestial drummers and musicians forming part of a scene in paradise. They look most spirited and elegant in their form as painted.

Among the terra cotta plaques found in the archaeological discoveries in Tippera Dist. of East Bengal, the Gandharvas are shown in a hybrid form.

The Gandharva figures can be seen in the sculptures of Bharatpura (in Central India), of Paharapura (Bengal), of Amaravati, of Nagarjunakonda, of Aihole (Mysore), of Udayagriri (Nellore Dist.) and of many temples in India.

In the Sun Temple of Konaraka there is an entire Dancing Hall covered with sculptures of Apsarases and Gandharvas. Every niche and corner is decorated with the Mithuna figures. All of them of course confirm the rules given in books like the Agni Purana which say "decorate every niche and corner with the images of couples". It need not be said that it was these fanciful and imaginative representations by the artists that have made a deep and lasting impression on the mind of the later generation, and particularly of the writers of different periods.

These sculptures mostly belong to the Gupta, Chalukya and Pallava periods and range from the 5th to the 8th century A. D. and onwards; those of Konaraka and Paharapura belong to the medieval period; but we come across Gandharva Sculpture and figures in the Gandhara Art too, and thus we can go as far back as

the 4th century B. C. only and not beyond to find the Gandharvas represented in sculptural art. But historically speaking the Gandharvas belong to a period far earlier than this; so these representations in plastic art have a very little place in our historical review of the Gandharvas; the Vedic authority is the earliest and hence the greatest authority for us.

#### □ THE GANDHARVAS AND THE INDUS VALLEY CULTURE

We have no evidence to show that the Gandharvas and the Apsarases lived at the time of the Mohenjo Daro period; but from the little evidence that is available there we can safely say that both 'dancing' and 'music' were popular, particularly in religious ceremonies, at the time when the Indus Civilization flourished; for among the finds we come across a fragment of a faience amulet (\*67), a scene on which shows a man beating a drum and the people dancing to the music; similarly an amulet from Harappa shows a man who is playing a drum before a tiger (\*68). A beautiful bronze figure of a dancing girl is also found. E. Mackey feels that (\*69) the woman represents very probably a temple dancer of Mohenjo Daro. Nude bronze figures of dancing girls are also found.

It is clear that the people of this period knew and practised both dancing and music; and at certain ceremonies girls danced even without clothing on their body. If the Gandharvas were responsible for the spread of the knowledge of this art, they must have lived at a period earlier than the period of the Indus Valley Culture.

#### □ ANY PARALLEL INSTANCES OF THE GANDHARVA CULT ELSEWHERE

Whereas the traces of the Serpent Cult are found everywhere in the world in all its continents, we hardly find any instance of the spread of the Gandharva Cult even at one place beyond the borders of *Iran*. It does not mean that music and dance were not there; in the Greek and the Roman mythologies for example there were 'Muses' and 'Graces'; one of the Muses represented choral dance and song; and Graces too were goddesses of dance



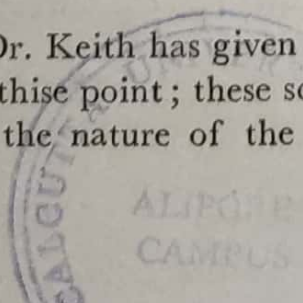
and of social entertainments; but these were ladies and not men like the Gandharvas, and moreover the functions of the Gandharvas were quite different from the functions of these goddesses.

□ THE GANDHARVAS AS SEEN THROUGH THE EYES OF THE WESTERN SCHOLARS

It is a well known fact that eminent western scholars have found the '*Nagas*' as a '*mysterious race*', and therefore while explaining the nature of these incomprehensible beings they have come to a particular stage and stopped. Exactly the same thing has happened in the case of the Gandharvas too. As regards our own ancient writers they have taken these beings even as they are represented in the sacred books; they have given very little thought to probe into their real nature.

The western scholars have however come to the conclusion that both the NAGA and the GANDHARVA myths are 'nature' myths; they have thus equated the Nagas with 'clouds', 'storm', 'rain-bow', and 'wind'; and they have equated the Gandharvas with the 'sun', the 'moon', and the 'rainbow'; and they have thus tried to explain their character; and yet it will be found that they were not satisfied with their own explanations; and they have come to the conclusion that "the nature of the Gandharva cannot well be defined expressly" (\*70). The origin of the Gandharva being is taken to belong to heaven. Keith is however very keen on connecting the Gandharva with 'water', and for this he has stretched the matter, his argument, too far. He thinks that the waters of the sky are the basis from which his activity has been transferred to the waters of the earth (\*71); or he considers that the Gandharvas are connected with water because of their connection with the Apsarases or Soma; he says 'Soma in water is Gandharva in water', and the original nature of the Gandharva is altogether obscured as can be seen easily. The Gandharva according to him is a complex conception and not a single one, being compounded of different and in essence disparate ideas (\*72).

Dr. Keith has given the views of a number of eminent scholars on this point; these scholars have given their own interpretation on the nature of the Gandharva being. To some of them the



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Gandharva appears to be the form of 'the rising sun'; to others however as 'Soma' or 'the rain bow', or as a 'wind spirit'; one thinks that the Gandharva is a 'giant'; some one else finds in him 'the genius of the moon'. None of them thinks that the Gandharva is a human being, and a historical personage. The reason for all this is that the ideas about the Gandharva are mixed with queer, statements that occur in the SAMHITAS, the BRAHMANAS, the PURANAS and in the sculptural art, that there is no wonder if one may get confused and confounded while understanding the true nature of the Gandharva. But if however we pass all these ideas about them through the sieve of proper judgement, we will be able to separate the ideas based on historical facts from those based on sheer imagination or fancy. We have to put a special emphasis on the historical evidence hidden behind the myths and the legends. We have to keep aside and ignore all statements that are more or less imaginary and highly exaggerated, and are far from reality, and appear on the vey face impossible, as for example, flying of the Gandharvas in the air without having wings; no human being can fly without having any wings.

Keith is right in saying that "the older school of mythology felt bound to seek for and find out the natural background to the myths of ancient gods or demi-gods like Naga, Varuna, Ashvins, Gandharvas and the like.....and many nature myths are transferred by a poetic fancy, which have but little connection with the original groundwork" (\*73). The Gandharvas were thus considered as high beings of air, and no real human and historical persons.

#### □ THE GANDHARVAS AND THE NAGAS : COMMON FEATURES

When one brings before one's mind the account of the Nagas and the Naga-kanyas and compares the same with that of the Gandharvas and the Apsarases, one is struck with wonder as one finds a number of points similar or common in the case of all of them. Some of these points are given below for consideration, and to enable one to draw conclusions therefrom.



They are as follows :—

<i>The Nagas</i>	<i>The Gandharvas</i>
1) Bitter enemies of the Aryan gods.	1) Enemies of the Aryan gods in the beginning.
2) Guardians of <i>Amrita</i> .	2) Guardians of <i>Soma</i> , identified with <i>AMRITA</i> .
3) Had to fight with an eagle who came to rob <i>AMRITA</i> .	3) Had to fight with an eagle who came to rob <i>SOMA</i> .
4) Great and renowned kings.	4) Great and renowned kings.
5) Though enemies of the Aryans, great respect for the Nagas : <i>Shesha</i> , <i>Vasuki</i> etc. highly spoken of.	5) Considered ' <i>namasya</i> ' or worthy of honor : <i>Narada</i> , <i>Chitraratha</i> , <i>Vishvavasu</i> looked upon with full reverence.
6) Lords of great treasures.	6) The words ' <i>susheva</i> ', ' <i>Vishvavasu</i> ' suggest the same idea.
7) Connected with the sea, atmosphere, mountains.	7) Connected with the sea, atmosphere, mountains.
8) Well-versed in the sacrificial lore.	8) Well-versed in the sacrificial lore.
9) Naga world known for all kinds of happiness.	9) Gandharva world known for all kinds of happiness.
10) Connected with very lovely Naga-kanyas.	10) Connected with very lovely Apsarases.
11) Made subservient to Aryan gods, and reduced to a low status, <i>Shesha</i> as a bed of <i>Vishnu</i> , <i>Vasuki</i> as a rope of a churning handle.	11) Made subservient to Aryan gods, and reduced to a low status of musicians ; even Gandharva like <i>Narada</i> is shown as a messenger of different gods and as a singer.

These instances are enough to show that there were many common features between the Nagas and the Gandharvas. From what has been shown above it is not difficult to see that the Gandharvas are not different from the Nagas; they are however not spoken as such because they had long ceased to be the enemies of the Aryans; they were therefore considered as different from the Nagas. The Nagas continued to be the enemies of the Aryans till the end and so they were differentiated from the Gandharvas; moreover the history of the *Ahis* or *Vritras* or Nagas and their conflicts with Indra show that the actual wars between them took place beyond the Gandharva Desha, i. e. between the Caspian Sea region and the Iran borders, and no Gandharvas were involved in these bloody wars.





# The Gandharvas

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 Rv. iv. 27.3
- 2 Rv. viii. 1.11; 77. 5; iv. 27.3
- 3 Rv. iv. 2.3.; Av. ii.2
- 4 K. Br. xii.3
- 5 G. N. B. pp. 165, 166
- 6 V. Pu. ii.10
- 7 Av. iv. 34.3.; Mah. V.,  
vol I, p.61, (ed. Jones)
- 8 Rv. iii. 38.6
- 9 Av. iv-37
- 10 Bg. x.26
- 11 P. V. Br. xii. 11.10
- 12 T. S. vi. i. 6.5; M.S. iii. 7.3.;  
S. P. Br. iii. 2.4
- 13 H. Gr. S. i. 2.8.4; ii. 3.2
- 14 Av. ii. 2
- 15 Rv. iii. 38.6
- 16 S. P. Br. xiii. 4.3.7,8;  
P. V. Br. xix. 3.2
- 17 S. Gr. S. i. 19.2
- 18 Av. ii.2
- 19 Ait. Br. i. 1.27
- 20 Kau. Br. ii.3
- 21 S. P. Br. iii. 2.4; T. S. vi. .1  
6.5; M.S. iii. 7.3
- 22 Yn. ix.24
- 23 Rv. i. 22.14
- 24 V. Pu. ii.2.12, 47,48
- 25 V. Pu. iv. 4.66
- 26 J. Br. i.166
- 27 Av, ii.2
- 28 Kau. Br. xii.3
- 29 E. H. C. K. pp-3,6
- 30 A. I. pp.2-3
- 31 RPVU. pp-60,180,181.
- 32 Av. xi.5.2
- 33 RPVU. p.179
- 34 Bg. x.26
- 35 V. Pu. ii.10,16,17
- 36 P. V. Br. xii.11.10
- 37 Rv. x.10.4 यम and यमी are  
called वैवस्वत and वैवस्वती  
respectively in Rv.x.10; Iranian  
'Yima' is also son of 'Vivan-  
hvanta'; JAOS xxxvi.315
- 38 See '37' above
- 39 Rv. x.10.4
- 40 Rv. viii. 1.11. ( गवाम् रश्मीनां  
धर्तारं सूर्यम् । - सायण)
- 41 T. S. iii 4.8.4
- 42 Av. v-37.4
- 43 Rv. viii. 1.11, viii. 77.5
- 44 Rv. iv.27.3; S. P. Br. iii. 2.4;  
T. A. i.9.3
- 45 Br. A. Up. iv.3.33; T.Up. ii.8
- 46 P. V. Br. xii-11.10
- 47 Av. iv. 34.2,3
- 48 Rv. x. 123.7
- 49 Av. iv.37
- 50 Rv. iii. 38.6
- 51 Av. ii. 2.; iv.37
- 52 J. Br. ii. 269.72
- 53 Rv. x. 136.5
- 54 Br. A. Up. iii.6
- 55 Rv. iii.38.6
- 56 S. P. Br. xi. 5.1.4
- 57 Sk. Pu. (Sahyadri Kh.) ch.  
20.101
- 58 Bh. Pu. vii.8.50
- 59 Av. iv.34.2
- 60 Ait. Br. i.1.27
- 61 Av. viii.6
- 62 Rv, vii,103
- 63 M. Pu. ch.9
- 64 P. Pu. ii.20. 13-14
- 65 M. Bh. (Anu. P.) 6114-6185  
(Dr. P.) 3660
- 66 Rv. x.10.4
- 67 I. C. p. 95
- 68 I. C. p. 94
- 69 I. C. p. 94
- 70 RPVU. pp. 180,181
- 71 RPVU. p. 181
- 72 RPVU. p. 181
- 73 RPVU. p. 60



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*The Apsarases*

THE PERFECT  
WOMEN OF THE  
ANCIENT WORLD



## The Apsarases

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### □ THE APSARASES : CELESTIAL SINGERS AND DANCERS : INDRA'S DELICATE WEAPON

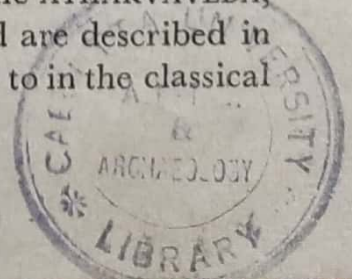
The Apsarases have been described as the *dancers* and *singers* in the court of gods; and since they possessed superb beauty and alluring charms of their personal features, they were the favourites of Indra, the King of gods, and he often employed them to tempt his enemies, especially the *Rishis* who tried to surpass Indra in power by their austere penance. Indra thus made the use of the Apsarases as his 'delicate weapon' as Kalidasa puts it (\*1), his powerful weapon being the thunderbolt or VAJRA.

### □ APSARASES AS STANDARD OF BEAUTY : THEIR LOVE AFFAIRS

The Apsarases have been invariably regarded as the Standard of Beauty and Charm for the woman-folk; and on account of their personal charm they have been described as being instrumental in leading others astray : Vishvamitra was thus *led* astray by *Menaka*, an Apsaras of repute, who entangled him in her love affairs and Shakuntala was born of them. The Apsarases are thus shown as loose in their character, acting almost as prostitutes, going from man to man.

### □ REFERENCES ABOUT THE APSARASES IN THE VEDIC, PURANIC AND CLASSICAL LITERATURE

The Apsarases have been referred to or described in the Indian literature, both Vedic and Classical, the earliest reference about them being in the Rigveda. All references about the Apsarases in the Rigveda however are very brief and tacit. (\*2). Some more description in detail is found in the YAJURVEDA and the ATHARVAVEDA; then the Apsarases appear in the Brahmanas, and are described in more detail in the Puranas, and are often referred to in the classical



literature. It will be found that the earliest references about them are shrouded in mystery; but the writers of the Puranas and of the classical literature made the accounts about the Apsarases readable by supplying the missing matter in them with the help of threads available in the current traditions about them; thus these threads formed the basis of these accounts, and the writers amply used their fertile imagination in reconstructing these accounts.

□ WHAT DOES THE RIGVEDA SAY ABOUT THESE APSARASES?  
URVASHI PROMINENTLY MENTIONED

The Rigveda gives us the following information about the Apsarases :

(i) We are told that the Apsarases are connected with the sea (\*3);

(ii) that they were the mothers of the Vasishthas (\*4) and the descendants of Vasishtha were proud of sitting among them (\*5);

(iii) the connection of the Gandharvas with the Apsarases is clearly shown (\*6);

(iv) the use of the word 'jara' in connection with the Apsarases may show their 'loose character' only if the word had acquired its present bad meaning at that time of the Rigveda (\*7);

(v) the Gandharvas and the Apsarases are said to be the parents of YAMA and YAMI (\*8);

(vi) URVASHI seems to be the only Apsaras about whom a specific reference is made in the Rigveda (\*9). It is here that the love affair of URVASHI and PURURAVAS is first referred to. Every one knows how the story of Urvashi and Pururavas has influenced the Indian mind. Bharata was the son of these two and India got its name from this Bharata, and it is known as BHARATA BHUMI. It is therefore quite natural that Urvashi's name should be so very famous from the Vedic time. This Urvashi is referred to in the Rigveda not once but many times, and not



in one Mandala but in different Mandalas (\*9). This shows what influence the name URVASHI carried at that time among the Rigvedic people. Now even here URVASHI is connected with water as all the Apsarases in the later period are shown connected with; Urvashi is talked of very highly by the Rigvedic poets. It was an object of pride and honour for the yajamanas if their work was appreciated by Urvashi; it was considered a most desirable thing. Urvashi is asked by the sages to do favour by approving their work in sacrificial rites (\*10). Rigveda refers to Vasishtas being the adopted sons of Urvashi (\*11). This clearly shows how honourable the Apsarases were considered by the Rigvedic seers.

The word 'Urvashi' is however found used in the plural number in the Rigveda (\*12) and it naturally caused difficulty in the interpretation of that word to later interpreters; they thought, 'Were there many Urvashis?' And the word was then taken to mean not an 'Apsaras' but to mean a 'dawn'; some interpreted the word to mean 'the moon' also. The word 'Pururavas' was then taken to mean 'the sun'. The difficulty was aggravated since the proper derivation of the word could not be traced. It is clear that at the time of the composition of the Vedic hymns the traditions about the Apsarases had either become half-forgotten or else the Vedic Rishis had not obtained the detailed information about the Apsaras world, and about the leading Apsarases like Urvashi; perhaps there were only vague traditions afloat about them at the time and the word 'Urvashi' simply meant an 'Apsaras'.

#### □ APSARASES AS DESCRIBED IN THE YAJURVEDA AND THE ATHARVAVEDA

In the YAJURVEDA and in the ATHARVAVEDA we go a step further and we get additional information about the Apsarases. Along with Urvashi, Menaka and other Apsarases too figure here prominently (\*13). Atharva Veda however leads us into many more details. We are clearly told where they lived, the place of their home is clearly mentioned (\*14). We are told that the 'sea' is their home, and it is from here that they go to different places. The sages are however in the mythical world and they have to depend for their information on what others say. They make a

clear reference to this when they say 'so we are informed'. The Rigveda too connects the Apsarases with the sea.

Then the Atharva Veda shows us the connection between the Apsarases and the Gandharvas (\*15). It says that the Gandharva moves among the Apsarases (\*16), why, they are the wives of the Gandharvas. The Gandharvas are not ordinary persons; they belong to the royal families; they are the lords of the world, and they deserve every sort of honour and respect (\*17). So both the Gandharvas and the Apsarases are worthy of salutation, especially the Apsarases, because they are the wives of the Gandharvas. (\*18).

The Apsarases possess the best of things; even their personal form is full of scents, fragrance. The poets desire to get even better things than what are possessed by them (\*19) including the fragrant things that they own (\*20). All this clearly shows that the Apsarases belonged to very noble families even like those of the Gandharvas.

#### □ AN UGLY PICTURE OF THE APSARASES GIVEN BY THE ATHARVA VEDA

The Atharvan sages however seem to have very vague and indistinct ideas about these Apsarases; their legends had become unintelligible owing to the lapse of unimaginable time, they being people of proto-Vedic period. It is on account of this fact that the later sages have given us an altogether different picture of them. They are compared with the Pishachas, the Kimeed-ins and such other harmful beings; and the poets pray gods to give them protection from them (\*21). The Apsarases are thus described as dangerous creatures; they are also shown as given to sexual enjoyment and of a voluptuous character (\*22). But this view is restricted to the Atharva Veda only; at other places they are not at all brought to the level of Rakshasas, Pishachas, Dasas, Danavas etc. Thus it is from here that the character of the Apsarases is shown changed, leaning on the other side of goodness. It was perhaps due to the insufficient knowledge that the poets had about them.



Now the Apsarases are spoken of as an *Aja-Sringi* plant also, thus showing complete ignorance about the nature of these people. Henceforth much of the accounts about the Apsarases will be found supplied in metaphorical, allegorical, philosophical or in mystic language, much of it based on imagination and fancy of the poets.

□ APSARASES AS DESCRIBED BY THE BRAHMANAS, THE UPANISHADS AND GRIHYA SUTRAS

The Apsarases figure in the Brahmanas, in the Upanishads and in the Grihya Sutras. Thus the S. P. Br. (\*23) speaks about the Apsarases as swimming about in a lake in the form of birds. The Vedic writers describe the Apsarases as 'birds' for the first time; in the same Brahmana we find many an interesting detail about them which we do not find in the Rigveda. Thus there is an additional account about the Apsaras-world. Apsarases figure in the Jaiminiya Brahmana (\*24), S. P. Br. (\*25) and Kau. Brahmana (\*26) where they are shown disporting in rivers full of blue and white lotuses and wafting sweet fragrance all round. They are now raised from the world of gods and men to atmospheric region, and a special 'home' has been assigned to them there. In J. Up. Br. (\*27) we are told that a man can choose birth at will once he attains the Brahma world; but before obtaining the world of Brahma, he has to pass through various other regions, and there are the worlds of the Gandharvas and the Apsarases in the Antariksha through which he must pass; so a special world has been assigned for the Apsarases and the Gandharvas. But they have also been shown as living on the earth; thus the real home of the Gandharvas and the Apsarases is lost sight of. The poets have thus found for them a home at places found suitable to their varying imaginations.

This idea of the Gandharva - Apsaras world is carried further in the Upanishad period. Br. A. Up. (\*28) for example describes how the bliss in the Gandharva (and of course of the Apsaras) world is far superior to that of the mortal world. Yajnyavalkya while explaining the nature of the absolute bliss defines what the *Unit* of the bliss is : the *Unit of bliss*, he says, is that of a happy

man in this world. Now that of the Gandharvas it is 100 times this unit.

In the Kau. Br (\*29) of the Rigveda it is stated that Agni, Vayu, Aditya, Chandramas and Ushas were born from Prajapati; and Ushas took the form of Apsaras. To her their minds inclined; they poured out seed (\*30); Bhava is said to have been born of this seed. Thus the Brahmana connects Ushas, a deity of nature, with an Apsaras, which clearly shows how vague the idea about the Apsaras was entertained by these Vedic sages.

Other Brahmanas like the Panch. V. Br., the S. P. Br. and others occasionally mention some incidents in the life of the Apsarases and the Gandharvas, showing a very close connection between them. Thus in the Panch. V. Br. (\*31) Gandharva URNAYU is shown sitting among the Apsarases and enjoying a joint swing: thus the Apsarases are shown loving the Gandharvas. The S. P. Br. besides giving in detail the story of Menaka, gives an instance of a rite (\*32) in which the priest points out to the young men and maidens present, when he really wants to indicate the Gandharvas and the Apsarases. This only shows that the Apsarases and the Gandharvas were held so high that their presence was felt necessary even during the wedding ceremony, and since no Gandharvas and the Apsarases existed at the time other young couples present at the time were represented for them.

The Brahmanas also endowed the Apsarases with the power of bestowing children; thus the Panch. V. Br. (\*33) shows how the Apsarases are besought to bestow progeny. S. Gr. Sutra (\*34) too admits this fact and supports the view expressed in the Brahmanas. In various Hindu rites that are recorded in the Grihya Sutras the Apsarases figure prominently. It has been recorded in the Grihya Sutras that while offering Tarpana at the close of the Vedic study, a student has to honour the Apsarases and the Gandharvas among other deities.

H. Gr. Sutra (\*35) speaks of the 'insight' that dwells with the Apsarases. A newly initiated student therefore prays Apsarases to confer that 'insight' on him. The same Grihya Sutra (\*36) also



speaks of the 'scent' or 'fragrance' that dwells with the Apsarases, and the SNATAKA after his bath prays them to give him 'the divine and human scents'. Rigveda also refers to a class of ladies distinguished by their scent (\*36A). 3 am

So far we have quoted a number of references right from the Rigveda to the Grihya Sutras but nowhere have we found the Apsarases treated as dancers & singers in the celestial court; on the contrary they have been spoken of as very honourable persons, respected both by sages and the people. They were present at the sacrifices, and their approval was sought as regards the performance of the sacrifices. There were very learned women among the Apsarases and Urvashi has been shown as a seer or Brahmavadini in the tenth Mandala of the Rigveda.

#### □ APSARASES IN THE PURANAS

Now we come to an altogether different age. We are far removed in time from the Vedic period; most of the Vedic traditions seem to have been completely obliterated or half-forgotten; and to make them clear and understandable, bards and poets had to reconstruct them supplying the missing portion and making them as attractive as possible. We are in the PURANIC period now.

VISHNU PURANA (\*37) gives us a long list of the Apsarases and their consorts; we are told that they are adept in musical performance; they have attained the greatest skill in dancing; they play musical instruments; and they entertain gods. They are here shown as attendants of the Sun. Different Apsarases wait upon the Sun in different months; and their husbands the Gandharvas are also with them. During the twelve months there are twelve Apsarases and twelve Gandharvas. They are: Kratusthala, Punjikasthala, Menaka, Rambha or Sahajanya, Pramlocha, Anumlocha, Ghritachi, Vishvachi, Urvashi, Purvachitti, Tilottama and Rambha. The corresponding Gandharva consorts are: Tumburu, Narada, Haha, Huhu, Vishvavasu (i), Ugrasena, Suruchi, Vishvavasu (ii), Chitrasena, Urnayu, Dhritarashtra and Surya-varchas.

The specific duty and the specific profession of the Apsarases is now fixed; their status is now lowered from what it was in the Vedic period. Instead of honourable position enjoyed then, they are now shown as attendants of gods.

*Matsya Purana* too assigns them definite functions. (\*38). The Gandharvas are described as flying in the region of the clouds with the Apsarases; they are holding garlands and bunches of flowers, the idea being that they are hurrying to the shrine to worship some deity.

In the *Skanda Purana* (\*39) we find Naga-kanyas compared with the Apsarases; and henceforth any the most charming and beautiful lady of the mortal world will be found compared with an Apsaras. So the Apsarases are the standard of beauty as said above, and Sk.P. says so (\*40). Names of some of the famous Apsarases are mentioned in this Purana.

It is worth remembering that in no Purana are the Apsarases compared with the Pishachas or the Rakshasas, and with such beings which are considered as dangerous or injurious; on the contrary they are shown as divine, and are invariably associated with the Vidyadharas, Siddhas or Nagas. It should be noted that arts like music and dance were held in high honour in ancient time, even at the time of the Rigveda, and these Apsarases are shown as adept in these arts; this fact only points out that they belonged to very noble families.

#### □ SOURCE OF THE PURANIC ACCOUNT

It may be asked : Where did the writers of the Puranas get the additional information about the Apsarases? Now brief and implied references were already there in the Rigveda and other Vedic works; but most of the information came from legends and stories current at the time. There were Gathas (which are often quoted) and Akhyanas very popular among the people; there was a class of Charanas, story tellers, who carried with them a fund of information on various subjects, and a number of stories of ancient time. Many of these stories were composed by them from some scant references in the Gathas. Thus the account about the



Apsarases was supplied by these story tellers. Of course many a time it was highly exaggerated by the authors of the Puranas too.

As the Apsarases are shown connected with water, so are they shown connected with trees also. They appear as Vrikshakas (वृक्षका). Some trees were sacred to them; they were CHAITYA TREES, and not a leaf of these trees was to be destroyed. In the Tai. S. (\*41) the Nyagrodha, the Udumbara, Ashvattha and Plaksha trees are mentioned as Chaitya Trees; and they are said to be the abode of Gandharvas and Apsarases. It need not be told that 'TREES' had a very important place in religion of the ancient world. They were considered as abodes of deities. In later time the trees themselves were almost regarded as deities and were worshipped and prayed for even as the Pippala, the Vata and Udumbara are worshipped even today and prayed for in India. These trees are also connected with the idea of fecundity.

#### □ THE HOME OF THE APSARASES

Now what was the region in which these Apsarases lived? Where was their home? Of course it is very difficult to fix up their 'home' as different authorities have mentioned different regions as their home. The earliest mention is made by the Rigveda (\*42) which connects them with the sea. Atharva Veda too clearly states that 'the sea is their home'. The Brahmanas connect them with rivers or with the earth. The Upanishads, however, consider that there was a separate world of the Apsarases and of the Gandharvas somewhere in the mid-region (अन्तरिक्ष), between the earth and the sky. This view is corroborated by the Rigveda in one of its hymns (\*43) where the world of the Gandharvas and of the Apsarases is shown in the sky, and as such they are connected with clouds, lightning and even stars.

The Atharva Veda also states that the Gandharvas are the lords of the world, i.e. of the earth, and hence the sphere of their activity is naturally on the earth too. Again it is on the earth that the Apsarases like Menaka, Urvashi, Rambha, Tilottama and others have been shown moving and acting.

Bana's *Kadambari*, a masterpiece of Sanskrit prose composition, throws a good deal of light on the life of the Apsarases. It is a book that weaves a tale based on the life of two principal Apsarases. We find here a detailed account of the Apsarases, about their families, their home, their status and of their relation with the Gandharvas. We are told that there were 14 families of the Apsarases; some had their home in the sea as they were born at the time of the churning of the ocean. Some families belonged to the earth; some belonged to the Himalayas, and some were connected with heaven, with the sun, with the moon, with the wind and so on. The sea, the earth and the Himalayas are principally mentioned. Thus we see that their activities are connected right from the sea (or coastal area) to the Himalayas; and according to the *Atharva Veda*, it is from the region of the sea that they moved about and went to various places away from it.

Now though the Apsarases are considered semi-divine because of their association with gods they are after all human beings, and as such their place was on the earth. They might have been associated with the sea, the rivers, lakes, ponds and trees even as the Nagas and the Naga-kanyas are shown associated with; but the Apsarases and the Gandharvas are restricted to a small region only, and that is the Himalayan region spread as far as the sea; while the Nagas or Serpents are found connected with the whole world, right from Japan to western European countries, and even America.

Now we know that the presence of the Gandharvas is recorded in the Iranian mythology as mentioned in the *AVESTA*. They thus belonged to the Iranian country; and the presence of the Apsarases with the Gandharvas cannot be ruled out; they were their wives. The association of the Gandharvas with Kashmere is also well known; so the Apsarases are also connected with Kashmere, and the Himalayas are said to be their home. Thus the Home of the Apsarases may be fixed as a region bounded by Iran, the Arabian Sea, the region of the Punjab and Kashmere; and the whole region might have been the ancient Gandhara, the Land of the Gandharawans or the Gandharvas.



Now the ancient authorities declare (\*44) that the Nagas were countless in number; they were reported to be millions and billions, while the number of the Apsarases is limited to some thousands only. The Skanda Purana (\*45) says that they were 60 thousand. This statement too clearly shows that the Apsarases were limited to a small region.

#### □ APSARASES REPRESENTED IN THE PLASTIC ART AND PAINTING

At the outset it should be made clear that the representation of the Apsarases in sculptural art and painting has no historical value. The mention of Apsarases in the Rigvedic hymns is far earlier in time, i.e. they belong to a period not later than the 12th century B.C.; while the representation of the Apsarases in plastic art cannot be before the 4th century B.C. (\*46).

Yet to understand the character of the Apsarases better it will be advisable on our part to get ourselves acquainted with the representation of the Apsarases in the sculptural art and painting.

In all these carved figures and paintings the Apsarases appear as dancers in the court of gods; they have been shown as the most charming and attractive ladies; and they are invariably associated with their consorts, the Gandharvas.

At Ajanta (cave xvii) one may have the sight of these Apsarases in many beautiful poses. In cave I we see a group of these Apsarases forming part of a scene in paradise; they are shown as "most spirited and elegant in the airy lightness"; they are shown as delicate and full of charm (\*47).

Bharhut Art shows a pannel of sculptured pillar where a group of the Apsarases is seen (\*48).

Many beautiful poses of these Apsarases are found in Sigiria (Ceylon) (\*49).

Rail pillars from various sites of Mathura show on their front side nude and semi-nude female figures, and they are Apsarases,

Yakshinis, Vrikshakas etc. It is the general convention that the figures of Apsarases should be shown nude.

There is one terra cotta figurine discovered at TALMUK (Tamralipti of ancient time); it is in Ashutosh Museum of Indian Art, Calcutta University; according to Prof. Kramrisch the figurine is of the Apsaras Panch-chuda produced at the churning of the ocean (\*50).

It is at the Konaraka Sun Temple where we find in the 'Dancing Hall', Apsarases and the Gandharvas carved in different poses carrying musical instruments. These sculptured figures of Apsarases are always shown as 'mithunas'. The artists have put their utmost skill in moulding their exquisite forms; we see "lavish and gorgeous display of feminine loveliness in in-exhaustible variety" (\*51).

At Khandariya temple, Khajuraho, we get a beautiful facade where Apsarases can be seen carved along with gods and goddesses. (\*52).

These lovely nymphs, Apsarases, Sura-sundaris or Naga-kanyas are profusely carved at Khajuraho, Bhuvaneshwar, Konarak and at other places in most seductive attitude. Here the feminine sex is elevated to divine honour as a critic has said. In each niche and corner one meets with carved dazzling figures of these Sura-sundaris with their sensuous beauty; and such representation is backed by authorities (\*53); and thus we find amatory couples everywhere; and each image is carved in distinct mood and gesture of love.

#### □ APSARAS TYPES IN THE WESTERN WORLD

Did the Western world ever come under the influence of the Apsarases who had become so very favourite with the ancient Indian writers? We have seen that the Apsaras and the Gandharva world (i.e. the land bounded by Iran, Arabian sea, the Punjab rivers and Kashmere) lay between the western European countries and India; so it was not unlikely that their influence should have been felt even in the western world. For this we have to go through the meythological accounts of those countries and see if



any parallels are available there. Now we find in the mythological accounts of these countries certain beings or creatures like Mermaids, Nymphs, Fairies, etc., and it is very likely that they are modelled on the Apsaras traditions; and so these traditions must also have spread in the west too. We shall therefore examine their case in detail and see how far they correspond with the Apsarases.

(a) *MERMAIDS*: They have been described as half-human beings with the head and trunk of a human being and tail of a fish. They can better represent the type of Naga-kanyas than that of the Apsarases. Their bodily form resembles almost like that of a Naga-kanya, the only difference being that the Mermaids have the tail of a fish while the Naga-kanya has that of a serpent. In all other matters however the Mermaids and the Apsarases and the Naga-kanyas are similar. Mermaids are known for their beauty and for their seductive manner; they are connected with sea; they possess sweet voice. They are thus reminiscent of the ancient Naga-kanyas and Apsarases. Poets have amply sung about the Mermaids as they have sung about the Naga-kanyas and the Apsarases. All other information about the Mermaids is only implied, since nothing more is said about them.

(b) *NYMPHS*: They have been shown in the mythological accounts of the West as semi-divine maidens inhabiting sea, rivers, fountains, hills, woods or trees, and attending upon superior deities. We read about these nymphs in the European mythological stories, especially in the mythologies of Greece and Rome. Among these nymphs are *NAIADS* or water nymphs, *NEREIDS* or Sea-nymphs and *DRYADS* or wood-nymphs or nymphs dwelling in trees.

These nymphs have been described as very fair ladies and of mortal mould; they possessed tempting manners and had power of alluring even Gods; thus Apollo after his famous victory over *PYTHON* fell in love with the nymph *DAPHNE*. Gods were often after one nymph or the other as can be seen from different legends and fables. Jupiter's name (as that of Indra in the Hindu mythology) is well known in this matter.

Now all the important qualities of the Apsarases and of the Naga-kanyas can be found in these nymphs, and especially of

their tempting beauty; and when we read about these nymphs we feel that we are reading about the Apsarases only. Perhaps the legends and stories about the Apsarases must have reached the ears of the people of these lands, or the Aryans when they migrated to those countries might have carried with them important tales and legends about the Apsarases, so that they found a permanent place in the fables and mythologies of those countries; they then got themselves acclimatized there. The Teutonic people who spread in Germany, Scandinavia and Britain carried with them more or less Aryan traditions. No historical account is available about these nymphs.

(c) *FAIRIES*: They are described as 'wee' creatures, very very small supernatural beings equipped with magical power. As their name points out they are shown as 'fair' and possessed of attractive manners and good qualities. They are also known by the name of 'elves'; but an Elf is shown as a mischievous creature. There are a number of amusing tales about these fairies for younger folk; and many poets have sung about them. The poets say that the fairies come on 'gossamer' wings; and everybody is very anxious to know the dwelling place of these fairies; for they live in the 'Land of Wonder' up in the air, none knows where. They come with their magical wand; they are exquisite dancers. One of the fairies in Shakespears's plays says:

*Where the bee sucks  
There suck I,  
In a Cowslips bell I lie.  
On a bat's back do I fly.*

This shows how tiny these creatures are supposed to be.

The fairies are known by many names such as Elves (as said above), Gnomes, Baby fay, Tiny people, etc.

From the description about the fairies given above it would be clear that the fairies are no other than Apsarases in very veay tiny or miniature form. They have in them most of the qualities of the Apsarases: They have the attractive form, and they possess the power of engaging the attention of people; they possess super-



natural power too; dancing is an important quality they had. They may best be termed as 'wee Apsaras'. Thus the fairies only remind us of the Apsaras and the Naga-kanya.

#### ■ FAIRIES OF THE CELTIC AND THE TEUTONIC MYTHOLOGIES

The qualities described as belonging to the Apsarases and the Naga-kanyas are found distributed among various mythological womanfolk of the Celtic and Teutonic tribes that spread over European countries from Italy westwards and northwards. Thus we hear of the German SWAN MAIDENS, Norse ALFAK or elves, female Nixies, Danish Forest Maidens, Swedish WOOD GOBLINS etc., and all these carry an impression that they were the creatures closely resembling the Apsarases and finding a place in the mythologies and folk-tales of those countries. The Celts believed in a 'wonderland' in Elysium (an abode of the blessed after death) on earth which contained with other good things 'beautiful women'.

A question may be asked: why should it be supposed that these fairy-like creatures were the product of the Apsaras traditions and not otherwise? Why should we not consider that the Apsaras traditions have grown out of the traditions of these fairy-like creatures? For this we have to remember that in point of time the Apsaras traditions are the oldest; since they are recorded in the Vedas, the earliest literature of the world. And even in the Vedas they appear as if they belonged to still earlier period; they look as if they were almost in the form of traditions even to the Vedic people; to them they were the people of prehistoric time. While the nymphs, the fairies appear only at a later period; and this period may not be earlier than the 1st millennium B.C. or so. It is possible that the Rigvedic sages might not have actually seen the Apsarases or the Gandharvas; they had only vague ideas about them; and when the Aryans went to the East, West and South after their EXODUS from their native land they carried these legends with them; and wherever they settled, they made their permanent home, these Apsaras legends found their place in the mythological accounts of those countries; they merged themselves into them; and they got new forms and shapes in these mythologies. The Aryans that came to India had to pass through the land of the

Gandharvas and the Apsarases and had naturally detailed and clearer accounts of these people. Those Aryans that went to the West were however far away from the land of the Apsarases, and even had not been acquainted with their land, and so they had to depend upon available oral traditions about the Apsarases. Thus only faint images of the Apsarases were known to the ancient western nations; and as time went on these original traditions became dimmer and dimmer, and afterwards took altogether a new turn and form.

□ APSARAS : HOW IS THE WORD INTERPRETED?  
HOW CAN IT BE INTERPRETED?

Various attempts have been made to find out the original meaning of the word 'Urvashi'; Max Muller did his utmost in this respect; the word however could not be properly derived and hence the attempts were dropped. As regards the meaning of the word 'Apsaras' however there is a consensus of opinion, and the word is taken to mean 'that which moves in or through water'; it is so derived from the word 'ap' meaning 'water', and 'saras' from 'sri' (सृ) meaning 'to move'. The Apsarases have been treated as 'water-spirits'. Both the Rigveda and the Atharva Veda connect the Apsarases with water.

But we meet with a word 'psaras' (प्सरस्) in the Rigveda (\*54) many times; the word is generally translated to mean 'water' or 'liquid food'; but in one passage of the Rigveda (\*55) the word clearly means 'pleasing', 'delightful'. A sage calls his hymn or prayer 'deva-psaras-tama' (देव-प्सरस्तम) i.e. 'most pleasing to gods'.

Thus if the word 'psaras' had also the meaning of 'pleasing', the meaning of the word 'a-psaras' would mean just the opposite, i.e. 'not pleasing', and hence secondarily 'ugly', 'hateful, detestable, contemptible, one to be shunned', and so on.

Now imagine the role of the Apsarases, and their behaviour towards the Aryans when they passed through the lands of IRAN, GANDHAR etc., towards the Land of the Bharatas; they were passing after their EXODUS from their HOME to find a permanent HOME, a new one, and thus they were foreigners to the Gandhar-



vas and the Apsarases; it was natural therefore, that the Aryans had to give dreadful fights to those through whose lands they had to pass; it was for their own survival, for their very existence. The Gandharvas had to use all military strategies; and the Gandharvas were a people of great military class. They therefore might have employed Apsarases to entice the members of the military personnel of the Aryans; and by bringing the generals or other important persons, sages or wise men in particular, under the influence of women, it was possible to weaken the strength of the enemy; and this is a strategy that is often employed in warfare. But there are others in the army who are hardly entrapped in this way; they on the contrary try to dissuade these loose persons from these dangerous members of the fair-sex; such people are likely to call these fair and charming women of the Apsaras-type as 'unpleasing, detestable, ugly and dangerous women to be shunned'. Thus the Apsarases, the consorts of the Gandharvas, must have been dubbed as 'A-psaras', and the same name must have become common with the Aryans, and it was so recorded in their books and traditions, and it passed on from generation to generation in the same form.

In this connection one is reminded of the epithets and comparisons used for the Apsaras in the Atharva Veda, where they are spoken of as 'kimeedins', 'pishachas' and so on; and that was the natural impression about the Apsarases which the enemies, 'the Aryans', carried with them.

In course of time however the word 'a-psaras' must have lost its original sense even as the word 'asu-ra'. The whole Vedic Text itself had become unintelligible many a time, and grammarians and commentators of the Vedic texts had to labour hard to fix the meaning of many a word and passage; and while doing so the word often lost its original sense and acquired a new one. The meaning of the word 'apsaras' too must have become unintelligible, since how could the people believe that the most fair and attractive ladies were the 'most unpleasing' ones? They therefore must have sought for a good explanation of the word, and they must have found the connection of the Apsaras with 'water' and the word 'a-psaras' might have become 'ap-saras' instead.

### ☒ HOW CAN 'WATER' BE THE HOME OF THE APSARASES ? LAKE-DWELLERS OF PRE-HISTORIC PERIOD

But how can the Apsarases be connected with water, i. e. the sea, lakes, rivers and springs? We of course know that the Naga-kanyas have been invariably associated with them. But how can the sea be the 'home' of such persons unless they be considered as aquatic creatures? The British poets once used to sing that the 'sea' was their 'home'; but it was because their navy was so strong and they commanded the sea; about the Apsarases however we do not know about their naval power or their command over the sea. The Apsarases have been described as very fond of sporting in lakes (\*56); they might have been connected with a region that was associated with water; and the Himalayas is that region; one of its rivers is even called 'waters', 'JALAM', 'ZELAM', and 'VITASTA' is that river.

But there is another possibility of the Apsarases being connected with water, and it is that they belonged to the community of the Lake-Dwellers. According to Will Durant (\*57) there was a community of Lake-Dwellers, and villages under water in lakes have been discovered in India, Borneo, Sumatra, Scotland, France, Switzerland, Italy and Russia and at some other places. Such villages existed in India some ten thousand years back, while in Europe about some seven thousand years back. So the connection of the Apsarases with water cannot be a myth. In this connection one is reminded of the Artharva Veda; it says: 'it is from here that they go abroad' (\*58).

And there is still another possibility of their connection with water; they might be residing by the sea-coast, or by the side of rivers or lakes only; and people living away from water might naturally have thought that their home was water.

### ☒ THE WHOLE APSARAS PROBLEM SUMMARISED

Now we shall summarise the whole Apsaras problem and see what conclusion we can draw from it.

The Apsarases have been referred to in the three Samhitas,



viz, the Rigveda, the Yajurveda and the Atharva Veda. In the Rigveda what is stated about the Apsarases is very brief and implied; most of the matter about them is taken for granted. The sages seem to have thought that the readers had already enough knowledge about them; so they gave no details about them. We then get some more information about these Apsarases in the other two Veda Samhitas. In the Atharva Veda we see two pictures of the same Apsarases and there they are shown as possessing diametrically opposite qualities : in one they are shown as fair, possessed of all noble virtues, and belonging to noble royal families. In the other they are shown as ugly, and possessing abnormal and beastly qualities.

The Vedas supply the following information about them :

- (i) The Apsarases are connected with the sea and rivers, i.e. with water.
- (ii) They are spoken of as the mothers of the Vasishthas, and the Vasishthas are proud to be with them.
- (iii) Most prominent Apsarases like Urvashi and Menaka are before the mind of the Vedic sages.
- (iv) The Vedic sages are fully acquainted with the love affair of Urvashi and Pururavas.
- (v) The Apsarases are shown as belonging to a high family; they are the Gandharva-Patnis, and the Gandharvas are the lords of the earth; so the Apsarases belong to royal families too.
- (vi) The Gandharvas and the Apsarases are the parents of Yama and Yami.
- (vii) The Apsarases are said to have fragrant and scented things always about them.
- (viii) The Atharva Veda speaks of the Apsarases as of a dan-

gerous character, and compares them with goblins and other cruel and dangerous spirits.

(ix) They are shown as given to excessive sexual enjoyment.

Whatever is said about the Apsarases in the Vedas so far is not far from what can be said about actual human beings; and we do feel that they were historical persons; they belonged to noble royal families and possessed all the qualities that such ladies of high families are expected to possess. Some of the historical facts connected with them are their close association with the members of the Vasishtha family, and with Pururavas of the Lunar Race; and thus there is a very close and direct connection between the Apsarases and the famous Bharatas about whom the celebrated sage Vishvamitra sang in the Rigveda (\*59).

So the Apsarases belonged to royal families, and not to the low families of singers and dancers as recorded in the Puranas and other classical works, or as shown in the plastic Art.

Now we come to the post-Vedic age and the picture about the Apsarases becomes dim, hazy, obscure and blurred. Their influence however is felt everywhere. The poets of this period ascribe them new qualities; new legends are invented for them to explain their new character; their voluptuous nature is brought to the forefront; their tendency to gratify the sexual instincts is shown in an aggravated form. From their residence on the earth they are now brought to Heaven also. But what can the Apsarases do in heaven? They possess charming and tempting beauty; they are the consorts of the Gandharvas who are so well known for their music; so it is not unnatural for their wives to be good singers; and the womanfolk of ancient Bharata were the most skilled dancers. In the Heaven the Lord of the gods Indra was always in fear of losing his power by enemies whose penance surpassed his; and the greatest of these enemies were the Rishis. The sages were performing very severe penance and it was not impossible for them to possess Indraship. Indra therefore thought of making use of these Apsarases against the sages; they would be his 'delicate weapon'; he had already his dreadful weapon in his Vajra or the thunderbolt. The Apsarases might be sent to the sages to tempt them



away from their penance; it was thus that he could save his throne and power over gods. So he made the Apsarases his court ladies.

Thus to transfer the Apsarases from the realm of the earth to heaven was the work of these later poets who could not understand the real character of the Apsarases of proto-Vedic period. Their history was completely obliterated. But the Apsarases are also on the earth; the stories of various Apsarases who came in contact with eminent sages are given in the Puranas and are referred to by classical writers; and all this happened on the earth, not in heaven. They often came to the earth and when their mission was over they repaired to heaven. But how could they go to heaven? Did they have wings? The artists showed them and the Gandharvas as flying through the air without wings; their movement shows that they are in the Antariksha and passing through the air and clouds; their very posture speaks of this. The poets could not endow them with wings because no human beings have wings. Gods have never been shown as flying; they appear all of a sudden; but the Apsarases were not gods; they were thus shown moving through the air without having wings; they perhaps moved through their will power. But this idea perhaps did not appeal to some other poets, since they gave them the power of changing their form into that of a bird; as birds they could go anywhere. In some Brahmanas the Apsarases have been shown as sporting in a lake in the form of birds (\*60).

Then a time came when the poets thought it fit to assign a separate world for the Gandharvas and the Apsarases in the Antariksha or mid-region between the heaven and the earth, so that they may easily come to or go from their 'home' either to heaven or the earth. (\*61). Now the world of the Apsarases on the earth is completely lost sight of, and their new world is equipped with 'bliss', a hundred times more blissful than that of the world of human beings (\*62).

The family life of the Apsarases and the Gandharvas must have been an ideal one; that is why they have been remembered at the time of marriage ceremony. They are supposed to have the power of bestowing children; they possessed the power of fecundity (\*63).

Even in the actual marriage ceremony the Apsarases and the Gandharvas are supposed to be present to bless the newly married couple according to S.P.Br. (\*64).

But this is not all; the presence of the Apsarases is felt in various religious rites of the Hindus; and in each case the Apsarases are regarded as 'divine' (as *Devatas*) and possessing some divine power. Thus the Apsarases are to be honoured by the students by offering them 'tarpana' at the close of their Vedic studies. A student has also to pray to the Apsarases to confer on him 'insight' which the Apsarases possess (\*65); and the Snataka after his bath prays the Apsarases to grant him the divine and human 'scent' which they are supposed to possess. (\*66).

Whether it is the Mahabharata, or Ramayana, or the Puranas or any classical work, we get in them very scanty information about the Apsarases; generally we meet with a stray story or some reference here and there. It is in the 'Kadambari' by the famous poet BANA of the 7th century A.D. that a good deal of information is given. It is a book based on the life of two Apsarases of royal family named Mahashveta and Kadambari. The tale is of course fictitious, but the information supplied is vouched by authoritative works. It gives us different family names of the Apsarases, their home, their connection with the Gandharvas, their happy life in the royal family, and supplies us with many other details. They are shown as devotees of Shiva, and have nothing to do with Indra.

Bana first makes a mention that the Apsarases were employed in the courts of gods as 'kanyakas'; he states that there were 14 families of the Apsarases; he then gives the sources of their birth, many of which seem to be imaginary and based on the information given in the traditions; thus one family is born of the mind of Brahma, another from the Vedas, one from the rays of the sun and still another from the rays of the moon and so on; but one of the sources is the sea; their blood relation with the Gandharvas is clearly shown; the marriage between the Apsarases and the Gandharvas is common; their home is said to be the Himalayan region. They are shown proficient in arts like dancing, music, etc.



All this shows that they belonged to very noble families and were not court dancers. Bana treats them as historical persons. ✓

It has been shown above that the Apsaras traditions and legends had influenced even the Western world, and in this respect examples of Mermaids, Swan-maidens, Nymphs and Fairies are given. The mythologies of the western European countries clearly show this.

We have ventured to give a new derivation of the word 'Apsaras'; it is altogether different from the one given by tradition, and it is to be seen how far it is accepted by scholars. It is given on the authority of the Rigveda itself.

□ WERE THE APSARASES AND THE NAGA—KANYAS THE SAME ?

Now one more problem is to be handled and that is the connection between the Apsarases and the famous Naga-kanyas of the hoary age. Were they the same? Below we give a number of common features between them which will convince the readers that they were not different; they only formed an important section of the Nagas even as the Gandharvas were no other than and only belonging to a section of the Nagas, as clearly shown in the article on the Gandharvas.

<i>Apsarases</i>	<i>Naga—kanyas</i>
1) They belong to proto-Vedic period;	1) They belong to proto-Vedic period;
2) Known for their charm, loveliness, beauty and tempting nature;	2) Known for their charm, loveliness, beauty and tempting nature;
3) Connected with water, sea, rivers, lakes, springs etc.;	3) Connected with water, sea, rivers, lakes, springs etc.;

<i>Apsarases</i>	<i>Naga-kanyas</i>
4) Quality of beguiling others and tempting them to go to their land;	4) Quality of beguiling others and tempting them to go to their land;
5) Adept in the arts of dance, music, etc.;	5) Adept in the arts of dance, music, etc.;
6) Belonging to noble families, princesses, queens;	6) Belonging to noble families, princesses, queens;
7) Always shown young;	7) Always shown young;
8) Shown as enjoying a happy life;	8) Shown as enjoying a happy life;
9) Non-Aryan tribe;	9) Non-Aryan tribe;
10) Possessed of wisdom and intelligence;	10) Possessed of wisdom and intelligence;
11) Though originally of royal family, shown as attendants of gods;	11) Though originally of royal family, shown as attendants of gods;
12) But their region limited by the Himalayas (Kashmere), Gandhar, Iran, Arabian sea.	12) Their region unlimited, but there were Nagas in Kashmere, Gandhar and on the coast of the Arabian sea.

These are only a few of the many points common to both; it seems that the Naga-kanyas of this limited area came to be known as the Apsarases. The famous Ahis, Vritras, Shambaras, Bhedas, Valas, etc. seem to have belonged to this region; and it is not impossible to believe that the Nagas, the Gandharvas, the Naga-kanyas and the Apsarases were the same.



The Apsarases are thus historical persons possessing extraordinary qualities and superb personality. Even as the Naga-kanyas they belonged to the proto-Vedic period and their history had become dim even then; only scanty information was then available to the Vedic Rishis, and what they wrote was mostly based on traditions. The Aryans that came to India had scarcely any time to stay in Gandhara and collect more information about them. But the Aryans had befriended the Gandharvas first, and so the Apsarases were brought to their fold and like the Aryans they became the worshippers of their gods. The later writers wrote many imaginary things about them and painted them differently.



# The Apsarases

## NOTES AND REFERENCES

- 1 K (Vi.), Act. I
- 2 Rv. vii. 33.9; 12; ix.78.3; x.123.5; 136.6
- 3 Rv. ix. 78.3
- 4 Rv. vii. 33.11, 12
- 5 Rv. vii. 33.9
- 6 Rv. x. 136.6
- 7 Rv. x. 123.5
- 8 Rv. x. 10.4
- 9 Rv. iv. 2.18; v. 41.19; vii. 33.11; x. 95.10
- 10 Rv. v. 41.19
- 11 Rv. vii. 33.11
- 12 Rv. iv. 2.18
- 13 Yv. (Vaj. S.) x. 15. ff
- 14 Av. ii. 2.2
- 15 Av. ii. 2
- 16 Av. ii. 2.3; iv. 37.10
- 17 Av. iv. 37.12
- 18 Av. iv. 37.12
- 19 Av. iii. 24.6
- 20 Av. xii. 1
- 21 Av. xii.
- 22 Av. iv. 34.2
- 23 S. P. Br. xi. 5.1.4
- 24 J. Br. i. 42.4
- 25 S. P. Br. xi. 2.7.33
- 26 Kau. Br. xi. 3
- 27 J. Up. Br. iii. 20.8; iii. 28.4
- 28 Br. A. Up. iv. 3.33; T. Up. ii. 8
- 29 Kau. Br. vi. 1
- 30 Kau. Br. vi. 1
- 31 P. V. Br. xii. 11.10
- 32 S. P. Br. xiii. 4.3.7,8
- 33 P. V. Br. xix. 3.2
- 34 S. Gr. S. i. 19.2
- 35 H. Gr. S. i. 2.8.4
- 36 H. Gr. S. i. 3.2
- 36A. Rv. vii. 55.8
- 37 V. Pu. 11.10
- 38 M. Pu. ch. 9
- 39 Sk. Pu. (Sah. Kh.) ch. 4
- 40 Sk. Pu. (ibid) iv. 9
- 41 T. S. iii. 4.8.4
- 42 Rv. ix. 78.3; V. 41.9
- 43 Rv. x. 136
- 44 M. Bh. Adi Parva; N. M. Pu. 1051-1115 (vv.)
- 45 Sk. Pu. (Sah. Kh.) V. 10
- 46 The earliest sculptural art being not before the 5th c.B.C.
- 47 A.I.A., Pl. 152; Pl. 36 A.
- 48 (ibid), Pl. 36 A. and Pl. 541
- 49 W. B. pp. 248, 249
- 50 S. I. S. p. 114
- 51 F. I. A. pp. 180 ff.
- 52 I. A. H., Pl. 25
- 53 A. Pu. ch. 50, 1437-1454 (vv.) describe how different images of gods and goddesses are to be carved; there A-Pu. states 'रूपिण्योऽप्सरसः सदा', and शाखाशेषम् मिथुनैः विभूषयेत् ।
- 54 Rv. i. 41.7; i. 75.1; ix. 2.2; ix. 74.3, etc.
- 55 Rv. i. 75.1
- 56 S. P. Br. xi. 5.1.4
- 57 S. C. p. 95
- 58 Av. ii. 2
- 59 Rv. iii. 53.12
- 60 S. P. Br. xi. 5.1.4
- 61 J. Up. Br. iii. 20.8; iii. 28.4
- 62 Br. A-Up. iv-3.32; T.Up. ii.8
- 63 P. V. Br. xix. 3.2; S. Gr. S. i. 19.2
- 64 S. P. Br. xii.4.3.7
- 65 H. Gr. S. i.2.8.4
- 66 H. Gr. S. i.3.2; Rv. vii-55.8





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*The Yakshas*

A MYSTERIOUS &  
WONDERFUL RACE

## *The Yakshas*

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### □ ANTIQUITY OF THEIR CULT

The word 'Yaksha' is found in the Vedic literature, in the Epics, in the Puranas and in the classical literary works; it has been invariably used as a standard of comparison in all the works referred to above even as the words Naga and Gandharva; this shows how long the Yaksha cult has been influential all over India, in Ceylon and in countries around India.

But the information that we get about the Yakshas from the Vedic and other literary works is very very scanty; the Yaksha people seem so very ancient that at the time when the Ramayana was composed the very meaning of the word 'Yaksha' was forgotten; and the author of the Ramayana had to find out some explanation for the meaning of that word; this can be seen from a queer definition of the word 'Yaksha' that is given in the book (\*1). The Ramayana, while defining the word, take us back to the time of the creation of the universe and tells us that when the Prajapati (the creator) created 'water', he also created certain elements or 'powers' to protect it. The elements asked the Prajapati as to what work they had to do. The Prajapati said, 'Rakshadhvam' (protect); then some of them said, 'Yakshamah' (we shall eat), and others said, 'Rakshamah' (we shall guard). Those who said 'Yakshamah' became Yakshas, and those who said 'Rakshamah' became Rakshasas.

But even at the time of the compilation of the Vedas, the Yakshas seem to have presented a great problem in the interpretation of their character as the Vedic Rishis found in them something strange, something wonderful, something mysterious (\*2). In the Atharva Veda (\*3) they are spoken of as 'great Power'. The word 'Brahma' has been used as an exclusive epithet for them in the Atharva Veda, in some Upanishads and in the Maha Bharata too (\*4).



Thus the Yaksha Cult is pre-Vedic and the Vedic Rishis had no complete knowledge about the Yakshas and their Cult.

#### □ THE YAKSHAS IN THE HISTORICAL PERIOD

When we come to the historical period we find the Yakshas in the Buddhist and the Jain mythologies. In both the religions the Yakshas and the Yakshinis figure prominently; they are called there 'Yakkhas' or 'Jakkhas'. In the ATANATIYA SUTTA, a part of the DIGHANIKAYA, we get some information about the Yakshas; they are treated there as human beings, but some mystery looms about them. The Yakshas are also found in the folklore, legends and mythologies; and it is from these that one has to find out or rather glean scanty information and broken threads to weave a readable historical fabric.

#### □ THE YAKSHA WORSHIP

The Yaksha worship seems to have been very common among the primitive people of India even in the pre-Vedic period. The Yakshas were invariably referred to by the name 'Brahma'; it was an old appellation of the Yakshas. Atharva Veda (\*5) refers to this worship under the same name as said above. Banaras was the well-known place of the Yaksha worship. The Yakshas were associated with trees and tree-worship; many images of Yakshinis are found in the Woman-Tree design. Allusions are found about Yaksha Chaityas, shrines and Yaksha-sadas.

In honour of the Yaksha or Brahma great festivities were held in ancient time; and they were known as Yaksha-Mahas or Brahma Mahas; one such Brahma Maha is mentioned by the Maha Bharata as being celebrated in EKA-CHAKRA NAGARI by all the people (\*6). In the country of the MATSYAS the Brahma Maha was celebrated on a large scale, and there were all sorts of amusements, wrestlings, songs dances etc., and the King Virata himself looked after them (\*7). The same has been called 'Samaja' of Brahma.

Brahma Puja is also called 'VEERA BRAHMA PUJA'. The Yakshas were appropriated as deities by the Buddhists and the Jainas. Yakshas and Yakshinis appear as protectors of the Jain Tirth-

ankaras. The worship of Hariti Yakshi was very popular among the Buddhists, and this worship was in vogue from Rajagriha in Behar to Gandhar, and it had gone further in the Middle Asia. She was worshipped in each house in Bihar by the name of 'JARA'. Hariti was the protector of children from epidemics (\*8).

Yaksha Puja still lingers in some parts of India even as the serpent worship is found prevalent in all its parts even to this day. In Banaras according to legends the worship of god Shiva has taken the place of the worship of the Yaksha; the latter was ousted out of the city. It should be remembered that the Yaksha is not included among the satellites of Shiva.

In its period of boom the Yaksha worship was in vogue from Khotan on the border of China, Iran and Afghanistan to Siam and to the islands of the Pacific Ocean, and from Tibet and Punjab to Ceylon; but a time of its decline came and the Yaksha worship lost its popularity. The Yaksha deity that had its place with the Nagas, the Gandharvas and the Kinnaras, was now associated with the cruel and evil spirits like Bhutas, Pishachas and Rakshasas. The Yakshas were now propitiated only for averting any harm from them. The Yaksha worship now passed from the hands of worshippers of the higher society to the people of the lower type of that society, and the Yaksha, a worshipful deity became what is known as 'Jakha', 'Jakhai', and even perhaps a 'Dakini' (as is known in Maharashtra), which is a very horrible and dangerous spirit. Only under-developed people had faith in this evil spirit as Rigveda puts it (\*9); so it is clear that the Aryans did not favour it.

In the Buddhist literature Yaksha is called 'Jambhala Devtas', and the worshippers of this Jambha deity assert that those that partake of Amrita from this deity become young if old, and good-sighted if blind.

The Yaksha worship was very common among the Sinhales in prehistoric period; the Yakshas were known there by the names of Yaka, Yakkha or Yaksha; and the Yak ceremonies were performed in honour of the devil deity Yakini or Yakkhini, the female Yak. A very large element of demonism or devil propitiation had entered into Sinhalese popular religion.



### □ YAKSHAS IN SCULPTURAL ART AND PAINTING

To understand the Yaksha problem properly, and to have a better idea of how the Yakshas were considered and conceived by people, we have to see how they have been represented by the artists.

One important thing that we should keep in mind is that the Yaksha images are the oldest as found in the Indian art of sculpture; they are shown with huge bodies; huge stone images were worshipped in the open with no temples. The oldest image belonged to the 5th century B.C. It has a turban on its head, thick ear-rings in the ears, a thickly pressed garland, a triangular garland on the chest, angada ornaments on arms and Katakas on wrists; it has an upper garment on its body and wears a dhoti; its right hand is raised up and the left hand is on the hip (\*10).

In the Mathura Museum the statues of the Yakshas from Patna and the image from Parkham are kept. They illustrate events from the historical life of the Buddha (\*11). The colossal Yaksha statue in the village of Parkham, 14 miles south of Mathura, was first noticed by Cunningham. This statue which belongs to the 5th century B.C., appears to be of Manibhadra Yaksha, the guardian deity of the nomad Vanachara tribe. Pawaya (Padmavati, Gwalior Dist.) was the great centre of the Manibhadra worship, and in places like Bharatpur the worship of the Yaksha is still prevalent.

Another Yaksha image 12 ft. high is found on the confluence of the rivers Vetravati and Vidisha in the Bhilsa District, M.P. (\*12, \*13). Yaksha statues and figures at Patna, tutelary deities of the city of the Nandi-varadhan, and colossal standing figure of Besnagar of a Yakshi are some of the most important figures of Yakshas and Yakshinis.

Yaksha sites are also known as Veera sites. In Kashi Yaksha is called Veera.

In Ceylon images of Yaka were used in Yaka ceremony. Most primitive images were made of wax and mud (\*14). A group of Yakshas and Yakshinis are carved upon stone pillars of the Stupa railing at Bharhut. They are of course shown as earth-born and

possess something of the delicate beauty of all forest creatures; they are adorned with jewels. Yaksha figures were often painted on doors as guardians of the house; but sometimes they were there with certain decorative motive too.

The Jain specimen come from Kankali mound. On one of the sculptures - a railing pillar - there is a carved Yakshi in the conventional WOMAN and TREE pose; she is shown nude; she wears a beaded belt, and has got heavy earrings and anklets; she holds a sword (\*15). Yaksha and Yakshini images can be found in Jain temples in Gujarat at Saritra and at Taranga as attendant deities on Tirthankaras (\*16).

A large statue of Yaksha found at Peshawar and generally regarded as the most striking piece of work in the large collection of cultures in the Central Museum, Lahore, represents a royal personage seated on a throne with his left foot on a stone and with a spear in his left hand. He is KUBERA or VAISHRAVANA (\*17).

#### □ KUBERA VAISHRAVANA : THE LORD OF THE YAKSHAS

Even like the Nagas and Gandharvas of ancient time the Yakshas too were members of the military class; and all the three peoples belonged to such a hoary period that the history of all the three is today completely obscured. The worship and cult of the Nagas or serpents was in vogue throughout the different parts of the world, and the same of the Gandharvas was restricted within the bounds of the regions covered by Iran on one side and the Himalayan regions on the other; the Yaksha cult and the worship were however prevalent throughout India, and in places like Khotan, Ceylon and at places in the Pacific islands wherever the Buddhist religion had secured a firm footing.

The Yakshas were the guardians of people and their property. The king of the Yakshas was Kubera who is well known by the name of Vaishravana Kubera. Among the Buddhists he was also known by the name of Jambhala.

Now this Kubera was a very well known figure in ancient time; he was famous for abundance of wealth. Wealth is power and



therefore it was possible for him to satisfy the desires of all his suppliants. He was however very exacting in his duties. He was known as the mightiest of sovereigns, and king of kings. What has been said above about Kuber has been very well expressed in a Mantra which is recited in every Hindu house where the Puja ceremony is duly performed. In this 'mantra' Kubera is called 'rajadhiraja', 'maha raja' and 'kameshwara'; he is called 'prasa-hya-sahin' too. He is requested by the worshipper in the prayer to grant all his wishes and all due salutations are offered to him.

The word 'raja' is used for the Yaksha even in the Rigveda (\*18); in Kalidasa's Meghaduta Kubera is called 'raja-raja'. Kubera is also called 'Dhanapati', the Lord of Treasures.

Kubera was the King of the North and guarded the northern direction of Bharatavarsha, his capital being at Alaka in the Himalayas. Now in ancient time the northern region was known for gold; Mt. Meru known as the mountain of gold, is supposed to have been in the north (\*19); Hataka country is also in the north, and 'hataka' means gold; similarly Jambunada swarna, Paippalika swarna and Ashtapada swarna, gold of various kinds, belonged to the northern region. So it is in the fitness of things that Kubera who is the lord of the North, is considered as the Lord of treasures, or of gold in particular. But Soma, the most invigorating drink, Amrita, ambrosia, and Mani, a specific kind of jewel, also belonged to the same region, Mani, a fabulous kind of jewel, with an enormous hidden power, had been an object of great attraction for the people of ancient India. Its power has been referred to in the Atharva Veda (\*20); there is in it a reference to Sahasra-virya-Mani; and the name 'Mani' was considered as an honorific designation, as the name of the king of Yakshas was Manibhadra. Mani on the crest of a cobra was considered to have a great healing power in the cases of poisons and this fact is brought to our notice by many eminent Sanskrit writers.

According to the Maha Bharata, Brahma, the creator, is said to have given three gifts to Vaishravana Kubera; they were i) immortality, ii) overlordship over wealth and iii) guardianship of the three worlds (\*21).

Kubera's capital is also called Brahmapuri or Aparajita (\*22). Aparajita is one of the names of Vishnu as given in the Vishnu-sahasra-nama, where Vishnu is known by various names belonging to different tribes as Mahavaraha, Mahoraga, Nandi etc.

Kubera cult was spread far beyond the Indian borders; excavations at Khotan on the Chinese borders have revealed that the Yaksha worship was common there too. Huge statues of Kubera have been found at various places far and wide; they are found in Peshawar, Patna, Besnagar, and in Ceylon too. Figures of Kubera with goddess Hariti as his consort seated beside him are also found (\*23).

Kubera is always shown with a deformed and inflated belly, and he is so described in the Ramayana and in the Buddhist and Jain literary works.

The Buddhist work of art or literature shows Kubera as paying reverence to the Buddha.

#### ☐ YAKSHA WORSHIP IN CONFLICT WITH THE SHIVA WORSHIP

Kubera is not among one of the satellites of Shiva and originally the relation between the worshippers of Shiva and those of Yakshas seems to have been inimical as can be seen from certain traditions about how the Yakshas were expelled from the city of Banaras and how the shiva worship was established there; this has already been referred to above. The Yaksha worshippers were allowed to worship the Yaksha gods outside the city. Now we meet with monuments belonging to pre-Kushan Brahmanical art in which we find the figure of Shiva standing firmly on a crouching Yaksha (\*24). It is a huge 5 feet Shiva Lingam known as Parashurameshwar. The figure of Nataraja too stands on the figure of Yaksha (This can be seen at Gudi mallam, near Renigunta, North Arcot District).

This clearly shows that there was a keen rivalry between two different religious sects, and when the Yaksha worship degenerated the Yaksha gods came to be associated with Pishachas, Yatudhanas; Rakshasas, Danavas etc., and the original form of the Yaksha



worship was disfigured; but the Yaksha worship again got recognition from the Buddhists and the Jainas.

#### □ PHYSICAL FEATURES OF THE YAKSHAS

The Yaksha figures are generally represented as having a big belly and a strong built-up body with a short stature. According to the Rigveda the Yakshas were extremely beautiful (\*25); and the same view is held by the Epics, Puranas and the classical works. Whenever a stranger woman was seen the question put to her was "Are you a Yakshini?" (\*26); also "Never was such a beautiful woman seen among gods or Yakshas". When the ladies first saw Nala, they said, "How beautiful he looks. He must be either a Yaksha or a Gandharva (\*27)". Even the Buddha and the Mahavira were called Yakshas in the sense of 'beautiful, wonderful'.

The Yakshas are shown as having a robust form; in the Atharva Veda (\*28); there is a reference to Brahmapuri filled with Amrita where it is said that a Yaksha of robust body lived there. The Yakshas are always shown as 'mahakaya' (\*29); Yaksha images will be found as having huge bodies. They are also represented as having a pleasing form; in the Gobhila Grihya Sutra (\*30) we are told that when a Brahmachari goes to see the Acharya (teacher) and the learned assembly, he says: "Let me be as pleasing as a Yaksha". The same view is held by Mantra Brahmana and Drahyayana Grihya Sutra (\*31). There was something wonderful, strange and mysterious in the personality of the Yaksha and the same idea has been expressed by the Rigveda, and was continued to the time of the Epics and the Puranas. This idea of 'adbhuta, apoorva, chitra' i.e. 'superb, wonderful, extra-ordinary' conveyed but one sense and that was of something mysterious. Yajurveda (\*32) calls 'mind' as 'apoorva Yaksha'; and this was the general conception about the Yakshas.

The statues of the Yakshas are always shown as colossal; such colossal standing figures of Yakshas and Yakshinis have been found near Mathura, Patna and Besnagar.

Sometimes Yakshinis are mentioned as having the face of a horse; they are so mentioned in one of the Jatakas (\*33) and are

so carved at Sanchi, Bodhagaya and Bhaja. Mention is also made of a prominent Yaksha named as Kinnara in Maha Mayuri. It is clear that the identification of the Yakshas with Kinnaras was due to some misunderstanding about the characters of both the Yakshas and the Kinnaras. The Kinnaras too are considered as an equally mysterious people.

Yakshinis have been often represented as 'Vrikshakas', beautiful nude dryads, leaning from their trees; such figures can be seen at Sanchi (\*34). Trees are said to be the resorts of Yakshas.

#### □ YAKSHA SHRINES, TEMPLES ETC.

The Yakshas were, as we have noted above, pre-Vedic people; and even at the time of the composition of the Rigveda the Yakshas were considered as mysterious beings. It might be that the Rigvedic sages had not come into direct contact with the Yakshas, since the worship of the Yakshas was restricted to and centred round the Yamuna-Ganga valleys, and more in the far south, particularly in Ceylon; but the Yakshas were now really passing into a state of legendary and mythical accounts; and very prominent persons among them were now treated as deities and were worshipped. In the ancient world most of the kings and great persons of name were treated as divinities after their death. The Egyptian history well illustrates this point. The same can be said about the Nagas in India.

And when the chief persons among them assumed the form of deities when dead and were worshipped, their particular cult was formed in due course of time; and it is thus that we meet with different cults with their genesis in ancestral worship as in the worship of ancient kings or prominent persons. In the beginning this worship was performed perhaps in the open with no shrines or temples; but in course of time *chaityas* or places of worship were created, and later they were built up too; they formed the genesis of shrines or temples that came in vogue in later period. But the art of carving and sculpture preceded the art of building of temples. In the beginning the images carved were very small and rough too; but as the art advanced there came up bigger images and also colossal statues; necessity was soon felt for housing



bigger and smaller statues somewhere, and temples, small and big, were erected.

It is also likely that such images were in the beginning kept under trees, and the trees formed the places of worship; when however no images were at hand the trees themselves came to be considered as haunts of those deities and were worshipped; Yakshas thus might have come to be associated with trees. But we often read in the Epics and the Puranas about 'Chaityas' (\*35); they became the objects of worship; these chaityas were replaced by shrines and temples. Rigveda speaks about 'Yaksha-sadanas'. In one of the hymns of Rigveda (\*36) Agni is requested not to go to the Yaksha sadana. Of course huge statues of Yakshas and Yakshinis were not housed in temples.

The Yakshas were considered as guardians of persons and property; so the people painted them on their front door, or inscribed them on the front door of temples. The Yakshas were also considered as guardians of wells, lakes, cities etc.

#### □ CERTAIN SPECIAL FEATURES ABOUT THE YAKSHAS

(a) *Yaksha and the Mother-goddess cult*: In the remote past worship of deities was particularly centred round the Mother-Goddess cult; and the Earth Goddess, the Goddess of Fertility and the Goddess of Diseases were the principal goddesses that were worshipped. The Earth Goddess gave shelter and a home, and she and the Goddess of Fertility supplied abundance of food and children, and the Goddess of Diseases gave protection from diseases. Yakshinis were worshipped as devil deities, particularly in Ceylon under the name of Yakini or Yakkhini. Propitiation of such wicked and cruel deities was considered as a measure of immunity from some kind of harm resulting from all types of diseases. 'Bali's were offered to these deities; Kubera was the Lord of Yakshas, and the Bali offered to him was known as 'Maharaja Bali', and those who offered the Bali to him were called Maharajikas.

But the Yakinis were the types of deities which were common among lower types of people who were illiterate and were not far advanced in culture. In Maharashtra the word 'Dakini' has come

in vogue for a very cruel spirit, and it is perhaps the same as Yakini, the female Yakshi; or it might be the reminiscence of the same. The child-devouring deity 'Jara' from ancient Magadha also reminds us of the Yakini. These were cruel deities connected with diseases of children. In Maharashtra another deity known as 'Jeevati' or 'Jeevanti' is worshipped in the month of Shravana by mothers who have infant children. Nothing particular is known about this deity, but it is one of the types of Yakini.

Among the Shakyas, according to Tibetan tradition, all newborn children were presented before the image of the Yaksha Shakya Vardhana (\*37).

(b) *Yaksha-Yakshis in the Buddhist and Jain Religions* : The Buddhists and the Jinas had appropriated, as the devotees of their faith, those ancient people of different tribes as the Nagas, the Gandharvas and the Yakshas; and these are shown as having played a very important role in their religious activities; they are always represented as closely associated with the Buddha and Mahavira. In course of time the Yakshas were adopted as the Buddhist and the Jain deities. Yakshas and Yakshinis appear as protectors of Jain Tirthankaras; each Tirthankara has one Yaksha and one Yakshini as attendants. Yakshas were treated with great honour and respect at the time of the Buddha.

(c) *Yaksha as Dik-pala or as Guardian of the Northern Direction* : According to the mythological accounts of the Hindu, Bauddha and Jain religions, India as known to them was guarded on all its four sides by different gods; they were in reality four able military chiefs; they were called Dikpalas; these four guardians of the world as they were called, belonged to four principal tribes or races of India; they were the 'maharajas' of those tribes. The East was guarded by DRITARASHTRA, the presiding deity of the GANDHARVAS; the South by VIRUDHAKA, the presiding deity of the KUBHANDAKAS; the West was guarded by VIRUPAKSHA, the presiding deity of the NAGAS, and the North by VAISHRAVANA KUBERA, the presiding deity of the YAKSHAS. Thus the Yaksha community had the honour of being the guardian of the North, and KUBERA, the lord of the Yakshas was that guardian.



(d) *Yakshas Represented as Pot-bellied*: The Yakshas (and particularly Kubera) have been shown as pot-bellied. We have no knowledge today what led to the idea of giving pot-bellies or inflated bellies to certain deities and persons. Thus the sages Agastya and Durvasas have been represented as pot-bellied or big-bellied. In the temple of CHANDI BANON, Batavia, sage Agastya has been so shown (\*38). In the temple of PALLESHWARAM at Dhenupureshwar in Tanjor District, Durvasas has been similarly shown (\*39). The four ancient Yaksha statues at Mathura and Patna are shown as pot-bellied, and Kubera is invariably so represented. Similarly the image of Ganapati has at all places been shown with a big belly. Perhaps the motive behind this is to show that these deities have in their person abundance of gifts and all kinds of treasures to bestow on their worshippers, and that they are not poor imitated beings; for it is only the rich and easy-going people alone that have a big belly.

(e) *Evolution of the Yaksha Images*: The Yaksha images are the oldest among Indian art of sculpture; some of these belong to even pre-Mauryan period; but the colossal statue of the Yaksha found at Parkham near Mathura belongs to the 5th century B.C. Colossal standing figures of female Yakshas are also found, as for example, one at Besnagar.

But what was the original form in which such images had their beginning? We have said above that originally Yakshas might have been worshipped under trees which became sacred afterwards; and when the Yakshas became intimately connected with trees, the Yakshis or Yakshinis and Vrikshakas or Tree spirits were often considered as identical. Such a Yakshi in WOMAN-TREE motif can be seen on one of the Toranas at Sanchi. The Vrikshaka or Dryad is shown nude and leaning from the tree; the Vrikshakas are always shown beautiful.

The trees identified with the Yaksha worship gave place to Chaityas (about which there is a lot of references in the Maha Bharata) and these Chaityas were replaced by shrines and temples. But while this type of worship was being evolved, there was already the making of Yaksha figures, first in mud, then in wax and finally

in stone. Thus the evolution of the figures of Yaksha started with 'mud' and finalised in colossal statues.

Though some of the Yaksha figures belonged to pre-Mauryan period their boom period was in Maurya, Shunga and Gupta periods. More images were carved in connection with the life of the Buddha.

(f) *Places of Yaksha Worship and prominent Yakshas mentioned :* Maha Mayuri, a work of the 3rd century A.D., gives us some information about the Yakshas; it also mentions a number of places where the Yaksha worship was very popular; we find there the names of certain Yakshas too. The places named are: Rajagriha, Kapilavastu, Virata, Shravasti, Sakota, Vaishali, Champa, Varanasi, Dwarka, Tamraparni (Uragapura), Ujjayini, Avanti, Bharu-Katchchha, Agodaka (Punjab), Giranar, Vidisha, Kalinga, Malava, Shakala, Gandhara, Taksha-shila, Bhadra-shaila, Mathura, Pandya Mathura, Koral, Nasik, Vanavasi (south Karnatak), Ahichchhatra, Panchala, Kurukshetra, Kotivarsha (Bengal), Kaushambi.

Thus it is clear that the Yaksha worship was widely spread all over India, and even beyond it.

Prominent Yakshas connected with the above places are also given there. They are : Vajrapani, Maheshwara, Brahaspati, Sagara, Sudarshana, Mahakala, Vishnu, Bibhishana, Kapila, Vasutrata, Vasubhuti, Malyadhara, Shukla Danta, Mahagiri, Vasava, Kartikeya, Brihadratha, Duryodhana, Arjuna, Sarva Bhadra, Pramardana, Prabhanjana, Kinnara, Vijaya, Puranjaya, Tararka, Kutararka and Mahasena.

Excepting the two names viz. Tararka and Kutararka other names are mostly found in the Epics, Puranas or classical works. One of the names of the Yakshas is mentioned as 'Kinnara'!

(g) *Yakkaratha and the Ziggurat of UR :* We hear the word 'Ziggurat' in the ancient history of the Sumerians and Babylonians; and one of the ziggurats was excavated by Sir Leonard Woolley at UR. What were these Ziggurats, and why were they



so named? We shall now see if they had anything to do with the Yakshas or their cult. The Ziggurat as found at UR was a great staged tower attached to the temple of the MOON GOD (\*40). A ziggurat is described as 'the hill of Heaven' or 'the Mountain of God'. In the Bible it is called the 'Tower of Babel'.

I think such Ziggurats were none other than the structures that only reminded of the 'raths' of ancient times. The raths have served the purpose of celebrating the worship of gods through procession in ancient time in India, and they are in vogue even today. The size of such raths varies from place to place. In a comparatively small village only a palanquin serves the purpose. It is carried in a great procession through the village or town and the image in it (or some substitute for the god, a picture for example) is duly worshipped on the way. The biggest of such 'raths' can be found today at Puri temple in Orissa; it is the 'rath' of the God Jagannath (the Lord of the Universe) incorrectly pronounced as Juggernaut by Europeans. Now the procession of the rath of this God is a huge affair and thousands of devotees take part in it.

But there are some 'raths' permanently placed at a fixed place; they are of course big temples in the form of a rath, as can be found at Konarak in Orissa.

The 'Gopuras', very attractive structures before very ancient and well known temples of Southern India such as at Madurai, may have been none others than the raths standing before the temples. It should be remembered that 'rath' also means a 'temple'.

The ziggurat is said to be a peculiar feature of the Sumerian architecture; the Sumerians are believed to have gone to Mesopotamia from outside; tradition would make them come from the East. Now the Yakshas had influenced the people of the South of India, especially Ceylon, to a very great degree in the prehistoric period; so it may not be improbable if we suppose that they had gone or migrated to Mesopotamia via Persian Gulf, and settled there. They might have constructed rath-like temples there. The word 'ziuggurat' might have been the corrupted form of Jakka-rat\*

\* The word 'Jalam' (for the river Vitasta in Kashmere) turned into 'Zelum', and 'Jagannath' into 'Jaggernaut' so 'Yaksha-ratha' might have been changed into 'Ziggurat'

i.e. Yakka-rat or Yaksha ratha, meaning thereby that it was the temple of the Yakshas. Such corrupted forms of original words wrongly pronounced is not an uncommon thing; one should see how Indian names have been corrupted by the Greeks and the Europeans during the last few centuries.

(h) *Yakshas, Nagas and Gandharvas* : Besides the Shiva cult, there appear three other cults that had influenced the Indian population to their utmost at one time in the remotest period of history; and their influence is still felt in India in this 20th century. The worship of Naga or serpent is found in many parts of India even today, and that of Yakshas too lingers in some parts. It is clear that all the three tribes belonged to the most powerful military class of the time. All the three tribes might not have exerted their influence at the same period and at the same place; it is more probable that their influence radiated from different centres and at different periods.

The influence of the Nagas seems to have been the greatest as it had crossed the borders of India; in the east it had spread as far as Japan, and in the west it was dispersed in all the European countries; it was in the Pacific islands and in America too. In India there was not a single place where Naga was not worshipped. The Nagas are probably the original inhabitants of India; they were the great Asuras and they moved under various names such as Vritra, Sarpa, Ahi, Naga, Uruga, Bhujaga etc.

The Yaksha cult was on the other hand restricted to India and Ceylon, and it spread in the east as far as Siam, and in the north up to Khotan on the Chinese border. From the physiognomical features of the Yakshas they do not seem to have been the natives of India; but they must have come from some borderland of India, possibly from north-eastern side.

The Gandharva cult on the contrary was limited to a small region; it was within the bounds of the Himalayan ranges and spread as far as Iran. The Gandharvas (originally Nagas) thrived on the land of the Gandhara country; they do not seem to have penetrated south of the Himalayan ranges.



All the three tribes radiated their influence all round on account of certain features common in them, and these were :

- i) There were mighty kings among them; Shesha, Vasuki, Takshaka were among the Nagas; Kings like Chitra - ratha were among the Gandharvas; and Kubera, Manibhadra and others have been hailed as mighty kings among the Yakshas.
- ii) All the three tribes have been credited with having a certain immortal drink such as Amrita or Soma.
- iii) All the three tribes were well known for their fabulous wealth.
- iv) They were the guardians of the world, each guarding a different direction.
- v) All the three tribes were known for their charming physical features; all were considered as beautiful.
- vi) All the three tribes were non-Aryan; and lastly,
- vii) All the three tribes were appropriated as either devotees of their gods or even as deities by the Brahamanical religion, and also by the Buddhists and the Jainas.

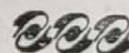
We shall now try to summarise the points that are likely to enlighten us on the the history and cult of the Yakshas. The Yakshas have been one of the oldest and most prominent tribes of India, and are known from pre-Vedic period, even like the Nagas and the Gandharvas. They are such antiquated people that even at the time of the composition of the Epics, very little was known about them. They became prominent again at the Buddhist period. Even like the Nagas, the Yakshas were appropriated as Buddhist deities. The Yaksha worship was in vogue at the time of the Atharva Vedic period; but to the sages of the Rigveda and Atharva Veda the Yakshas were somewhat mysterious beings. The Yakshas were equated with 'Brahma', and 'Brahma Mahas' or great Brahma festivals were celebrated particularly in Northern

India. Originally the Yaksha worship might have been performed at the base of some trees sacred to the Yaksha, or in chaityas, shrines or temples. A time came when Yaksha puja deteriorated, and Yakshas were considered as cruel deities and evil spirits. They were considered as Bhutas, Pishachas i.e. goblins. In Ceylon, in particular, their complete deterioration was evident in the historical period, at the time when Ceylon was aryanised. But the words Yakini, Dakini and Jara are the names of evil spirits found in different parts of India conveying the same idea. The Yakshas in sculptural art and painting give us some idea about their physical form; they are shown as having a robust and strong body; they had a short stature. They are shown as wealthy persons as can be judged from various ornaments they are shown to wear. Yaksha images are the earliest images belonging to pre-Mauryan period. Colossal statues of Yakshas and Yakshinis belong to the 3rd and the 2nd century B.C.. Originally the worship of Yakshas seems to have begun with images of mud and wax; and finally they culminated into being huge stone statues. Yakshinis are also represented in the WOMAN TREE motif. The Yakshas have been shown as guardian deities. The Yaksha worship spread from Khotan-Iran-Afghanistan to Siam, and from Tibet-Punjab to Ceylon.

Kubera was the Lord of the Yakshas, and he was considered as Maha Raja, Rajadhiraj and fulfiller of all desires of the suppliant. He was considered as the Lord of Treasures, and was the Guardian of the Northern Direction. His capital city was ALAKA which was known for its grandeur; his garden Chaitra - ratha was equally famous. Kubera possessed Amrita Ghata, a pot of nectar. Vaishravana Kubera was the name by which he was generally known. All the important things that he possessed were bestowed on him by Brahma, the Creator. Goddess Hariti is shown as his consort. Kubera is always shown as deformed with a big belly. There seems to have been a big clash between the observers of the Shiva Cult and those of the Yaksha Cult, and the Yaksha Cult was ousted from the city of Banaras; and the Shiva Cult was established there. In some images a crouching Yaksha is shown under the foot of Shiva. Again the Yakshas are not among the satellites of Shiva as the Nagas have been.



The Yaksha people are considered as extremely beautiful. But some Yakshas are named as Ashwa Mukha and Kinnara; it might be through lack of proper knowledge about both Yakshas and Kinnaras. It is possible that some Yakshas might have migrated to the confluence of the rivers Euphrates and Tigris and settled there; this can be inferred from the existence of the Sumerian temples known as Ziggurat which word seems to be the corrupted form of Jakka-rat, Yakkarat, the temple of the Yakshas. Nagas, Gandharvas and Yakshas have possessed some common qualities.



# *The Yakshas*

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vii. 61.5
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- 4 Av. i. 32.1-4; x. 2.29-33; K. up.  
iii. 1-2; M. Bh. i. 152.18
- 5 Av. x. 2.29-33
- 6 M. Bh. i. 152-18
- 7 M. Bh. (Virat P.) 12.12
- 8 H. F. A.I.C. p. 60
- 9 Rv. vii. 61.5
- 10 H.F.A.I.C. p. 29
- 11 R.I.P. pp. 120, 151
- 12 H.I.I.A. p. 17 (N. 1)
- 13 *ibid*
- 14 M.S.A. p. 148
- 15 H.F.A.I.C. p. 410
- 16 A.G. pp. 111, 112
- 17 H.F.A.I.C. p. 59; Pl. 33
- 18 Rv. x. 8.15
- 19 V. Pu. ii. 2
- 20 Av. viii. 5.14
- 21 M. Bh. (Udyog P.) 62.23-25
- 22 Av. x. 2.29-33
- 23 H.F.A.I.C. p. 60
- 24 H.I.I.A. Fig. 66
- 25 Rv. vii. 56.16
- 26 M. Bh. (Aranya) 50.13; 61.114
- 27 *ibid*. iii. 52.16
- 28 Av. x. 2.29-33
- 29 M. Bh. (Aranya) 299.20-21
- 30 Go. Gr-S. iii. 4.28
- 31 M. Br. i. 7.14; Dr. Gr. S.  
iii. 1.25
- 32 Yv. 34.2; M. Bh. i. 21.12
- 33 P.K.M.J.
- 34 H.I.I.A. pp. 36, 64
- 35 Ram. v. 15.15; M. Bh. i.
- 36 Rv. iv. 3.13
- 37 L. B. p. 17
- 38 H.I.I.A. fig. 359
- 39 *ibid*. p. 68
- 40 UR. p. 82.





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*The Kinnaras*

MYSTERIOUS  
AND ENIGMATIC  
CREATURES

## *The Kinnaras*

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### ☐ THE KINNARA REPRESENTED IN INDIAN ART AND LITERATURE IS IN THREE FORMS

The Kinnara appears in Indian literature, in Indian Sculpture and in Indian painting in a hybrid form, and therefore presents a great ENIGMA as regards its real character. It is represented in three distinct forms, two of which are quite different from each other; and they are there with full literary sanction behind them. These three forms are :—

- 1) the *Man-Horse* form in which the head is that of a horse and the body is that of human being;
- 2) the *Man-Horse* form in which the head is that of a human being and the body is that of a horse; and
- 3) the *Man-Bird* form in which the bust is that of a human being, but has feathered wings of a bird, and has legs of an eagle.

### ☐ SOME PROBLEMS ABOUT THE CREATURE

The following problems arise when we think about this queer creature :—

- 1) Has such a being ever existed on the earth? Or can it ever exist in the realm of nature?
- 2) And if it has not existed on the earth, or it cannot exist in nature at all, should we say that it is the creation of fertile imagination and fancy of the poets and the artists of the past?
- 3) And out of the poets and the artists who were first responsible for giving the creature such a fabulous form?



- 4) And if it is found that the poets were responsible for creating such a form and not the artists, where did they get inspiration from, for creating such a creature?
- 5) What should have been the reason that induced some to conceive the Kinnara in the *Man-Horse* form, and the others in the *Man-Bird* form? What was the original form in which the Kinnara first appeared?
- 6) How is it that the Kinnara has been associated with delicate arts such as music and dance?
- 7) What circumstances have led the Kinnara to be included among the demi-gods of India bringing it on the same level as that of the NAGA, YAKSHA and the GANDHARVA?
- 8) How is it that the Kinnari is considered as the standard of beauty even by poets like Kalidasa in spite of its fantastic form?

These are some of the thoughts about the Kinnara that confound the mind of the reader when he thinks about the creature very closely and seriously; and unless a satisfactory explanation about all the problems referred to above is forthcoming, the Kinnara will also remain as enigmatic a being as the *Naga*, the *Gandharva* and the *Apsaras* have remained even to this day.

#### ☐ THE KINNARA TYPE OF HYBRID FORM

And there is one more problem that deserves a special notice; and that is this: Why is the Kinnara represented in the hybrid form? And is this hybrid form of the Kinnara of the same type as that of GAJANANA or NRISIMHA, the HINDU gods? Again does this hybrid representation of the deities belong to Indian origin or is it imported from a foreign land?

#### ☐ KINNARA REPRESENTED IN INDIAN SCULPTURE

Kinnara in sculptural form can be seen in many Indian temples and caves both in the north and the south, but the *Man-Horse*

form seems more popular in the north (specially in literary works) than in the south, where the *Man-Bird* form is more favourite. The Kinnaras and the *Gandharvas* are represented in the GANDHARA SCHOOL OF ART (4th c. B.C.) and in the arts of the GUPTA period (5th to 8th c. A.D.), the CHALUKYA period (6th and 7th c.A.D.) and the PALLAVA period (8th c. A.D.). In the Mathura sculpture we find the worship of a Stupa by a Suparna and a Kinnara. The Kinnara is found in the sculptures of BHARHUT, SANCHI, PAHARPURA, UDAYAGIRI, RAMESHWARAM, KANCHI and MALLAM, and in the paintings at AJANTA. In all these sculptures and paintings the Kinnara has been depicted either in the *Man-Horse* form or in the *Man-Bird* form.

To take some concrete instances, the Kinnara shown in the Mandapa of Subramanya temple at MALLAM in the NELLORE District, has a horse-head with a long dishevelled mane. (\*1)

At Udayagiri, Nellore District, there is a panel of a Kinnari on a pillar of Kalyan Mandapam near the KRISHNA temple. It is a charming piece of sculpture. Here the Kinnara has feathered wings of a bird and its legs are those of an eagle; it has a human bust the head being decorated with a crown (2).

The Man-Bird form of a Kinnara can be found at CONJEEVARAM in the Kailasanath Swamin Temple (\*3).

Also at Rameshwaram in KUDAPPA, Cudappa District, a Kinnari with the lower part of a bird can be seen (\*4).

In the Dilwara Temple at Abu in Rajastan, carved figures of dancing Kinnaras, half-man half-bird form decorate the ceiling.

The SINHALESE artists too show the Kinnara of the MAN-BIRD type.

□ KINNARA : A HORSE OR A BIRD ? RESULT OF LACK OF KNOWLEDGE OR MIS-UNDERSTANDING ABOUT THE CREATURE ?

Is it not strange and astounding to see one and the same creature being depicted in such altogether different forms? What was it



due to? Was it due to some mis-understanding about the creature on the part of the artist, or was it due to the total absence of his knowledge about the same? But if it was a mistake it was not committed by the artists only; the same mistake was common with the writers too, writers belonging to different periods of time. And when the Man-Horse and the Man-Bird forms of the Kinnara were recognized and adopted by the artists and the sculptors in their art-production, it was in perfect agreement with the literary authority on the subject.

#### □ KINNARA AND KIMPURUSHA

The Mahabharata and the Puranas like the VISHNU and the BHAGAWATA describe the Kinnaras in the Man-Horse form; and the same view is held by the classical writers too. Manasara says that the Kinnara should have the upper portion of its body like that of human beings, but the legs should resemble those of an animal; the facial expression should have the likeness of an eagle, i.e. it should have an aquiline nose; its hands should be winged; the crown should be of lotus flowers (\*5) (चरणं पशुसमानं चोर्ध्वकायं तु नराभम्। वदनं गरुडभावम्। बाहुकौ च पक्षयुक्तौ। मुकुटं कमलयुक्तम्।). And the Kinnara should have a fierce look, i.e. it should look like a demon.

Vachaspatya (\*6) considers the Kinnara and the Kimpurusha as altogether separate beings; the Kinnara is defined as 'one having the head of a horse and the body of a human being (स तु अश्वाकारवदनः नराकारजघनः); while the Kimpurusha is defined as 'one having the face of a human being and the lower part that of a horse (स च अश्वाकारजघनः नराकारमुखः); Vishnu-Dharmottara Purana (\*7) does not consider a Kimpurusha different from a Kinnara; and says that Kinnara may have either (i) a human head and the horse body or (ii) the human body and the head of a horse.

Rupavaliya, a book of great authority on Sinhalese paintings, says that the Kinnara has a tuft of hair on the head, a garland around the neck, a human body, but the nether part like that of a bird with wings. The human face is fair and radiant, and the neck is graceful (\*8).

We thus see that different writers and artists do not hold the same view about the Kinnara who is sometimes differentiated from a similar creature called Kimpurusha. It should however be remembered that both the words mean one and the same thing, viz. 'Is it a human being?' (किं नरोऽयम्? किं पुरुषोऽयम् ).

#### □ KINNARA : FIELD OF ITS ACTIVITY AND ITS PERSONAL FEATURES

Now in spite of this different representation of one and the same creature i.e. in the Man-Horse and the Man-Bird forms, the writers and the artists of all classes have admitted that the distinguishing characteristics and the functions of the Kinnara are one and the same. The Kinnara has been described first of all as the celestial musician and dancer. Its specific duty is that of waiting upon the gods, and especially on Kubera, the Lord of the Yakshas, who is always praised as the 'King of kings', 'great King' and the 'Lord of Treasures'. The Kinnara is considered as one of the demi-gods, and the classical writers have invariably spoken about its beauty, its proficiency in music and its fondness for amorous sports.

#### □ SOME DIVINE QUALITIES POSSESSED BY THE KINNARA

Amarasimha in his Amarakosha (\*9) describes the Kinnara as of divine origin along with others, viz. the Vidyadharas, the Apsarases, the Yakshas, the Rakshasas, the Gandharvas, the Pishachas, the Guhyakas and the Siddhas, and as such it is endowed with divine qualities and hence considered superior to human beings. That the Kinnara possessed a very sweet voice is also vouchsafed by all classical and other writers; Kalidasa for example compares the sweet voice of Indumati, the wife of the king Aja, with the voice of a Kinnari (\*10).

As a musician the Kinnara has with it a musical instrument, preferably a lute or Veena. Agnipurna (\*11) dictates that the Kinnara should be represented with a VEENA in hand.

Both Kalidasa (\*12) and Magha (\*13) describe the amorous and sportive movements of the Kinnara. In the Kumara-sambhava



(\*12) Kalidasa specifically makes a mention of this when he describes the entry of the God of Love in the penance grove of the God Shiva.

An interesting description of a Kinnara pair is found in the Kadambari of the poet Bana. He describes the Kinnara as a queer creature unseen by human beings and belonging to a region of the Himalayas (\*14).

#### □ DISPARITIES IN THE CHARACTER OF THE KINNARA

From what has been stated above so far a great doubt takes possession of our mind and we ask ourselves : Can such a creature exist in the realm of nature in reality? The very character of the Kinnara is full of disparities. It is a creature of such a hybrid form, a horse and a human being combined in one frame of body; or as some others conceived, a bird and a human being combined in one frame of body! And can a horse sing and its song considered melodious to such a degree that it should stand as a standard of comparison? Kalidasa calls Indumati KINNARA KANTHI! And again the Kinnara with the face of a horse is reckoned as a model of beauty!

These disparities are such as confound the mind; and one naturally desires a satisfactory explanation of these things so as to enable him to understand the real character of the Kinnara so often referred to in the mythological accounts of the Hindus.

One is again keen to know how the Kinnara has come to stay in the Indian mythology, and what circumstances have been responsible for endowing it with the qualities of music and dance, and also beauty, the qualities that rightly belonged to the Gandharvas and the Apsarases.

#### □ KINNARA CONCEPTION FOUNDED ON MISTAKEN IDEAS

On a very close examination of the above questions one comes to know that such a creature as Kinnara had never existed in nature in reality either in the Man-Horse form or in the Man-Bird form. The Man-Horse form of the Kinnara is imported from a

foreign land as can be seen from what is given below; but its Man-Bird form has come through mistake and misunderstanding about it.

As regards the qualities of music, dance and beauty too, they have been thrust upon it through mistake, taking the Kinnara to be akin to the Gandharva. The qualification of possessing captivating beauty has also its association with the Apsaras and the Nagini worlds.

□ HEMAKUTA THE HOME OF THE GANDHARVAS AND THE KINNARAS

Since the Home of the Kinnara has been described as the HEMAKUTA Mountain, a region beyond the Himalayan ranges (\*15) beyond Bharata, it is small wonder if the character of the Kinnara was not properly known and understood by the ancient writers cis-Himalayan; and now the home of the Gandharvas and the Apsarases also was confined to the Himalayan ranges; and the land of the Kinnaras and that of the Gandharvas were mistaken as being one and the same. Very little was known about the Gandharvas and the Apsarases and their land, since both of them belonged to the pre-Vedic period; and so it was very little known about the Kinnara and its land too; and it was hence quite natural for the Indian writers to consider the Kinnara and the Gandharva on the same footing when no clear mythological accounts were available both of the Gandharvas and the Kinnaras. Now since the Gandharvas were considered as the musicians and the dancers in the celestial court, the Kinnaras too were thought of as celestial musicians and dancers; and both were considered as divine beings; and as were the Kinnaras so were the Kinnaris considered on the same line as the Apsarases; and they were endowed with all the qualities of the Apsarases. All this misunderstanding, it seems, was due to the absence of sufficient knowledge of both, the home of theirs being beyond the Indian border. And another reason for this misunderstanding was perhaps the unimaginable lapse of time; both the Gandharvas and the Kinnaras belonged to a period far removed from the time of the writers. The writers had to depend for their information on the oral traditions only, and they had to use their fertile imagination in



giving shape to the character of the Kinnaras as they did in the case of the Gandharvas and the Apsarases.

As regards the Man-Bird form of the Kinnara there were accounts in the Vedic literature about the Apsarases assuming the form of birds. Urvashi for example can be cited as an instance (\*16). When Urvashi meets Pururavas again after his long separation from her, she is shown as sporting in a lake along with other Apsarases, all in the form of birds. The Kinnara must also have been therefore supposed to be in the bird - form by some writers taking it on par with the Apsarases; or else there is no other reason to suppose why the Kinnara should have been represented in the bird - form.

There are some scholars who try to connect the word Kinnara with the word 'Gandharva' on etymological ground, and on the ground of comparative philology. They think that the Sanskrit word 'Gandharva', the Greek word 'Kentauros', the Avestic word 'Gandareva', and the Dravidian word 'Kudirai', all have an etymological connection (\*17).

And now whenever the Gandharvas and Kinnaras are represented in the plastic art, the Indian sculptors have shown very little difference in their deliniation, except in details of workmanship and style.

#### □ A BLURRED PICTURE OF THE KINNARA BEFORE THE WRITERS

And yet we have to consider how a horse would look when it sings or dances; and what sort of beauty it may show. None of these qualities are appropriate for such a creature especially in its hybrid form; and yet the Kinnara has been endowed with these distinguishing features; should we say that it was a deliberate act on the part of the writers and the artists with full knowledge of the creature? Or was it due to their complete ignorance about the creature? It has already been pointed out above that they had to depend for their knowledge only on oral traditions and mythological accounts that were carried down from generation to generation. They had not known the creature personally, so

they were not expected to have the first hand knowledge about it; on the contrary they had before them a blurred picture of the creature; and they had to give it a decent shape and complete it; and while reconstructing this picture they had to use their imagination and fancy. They did so and gave us the picture of the Kinnara according to their fancy; some gave us the Kinnara in the Man-Horse form, while others gave it us in the Man-Bird form.

□ WRITERS WERE RESPONSIBLE FOR CREATING THE PRESENT IMAGE OF THE KINNARA, AND NOT THE ARTISTS

It was the writers who were the first to give us the picture of the Kinnara in the hybrid form; for the word Kimpurusha occurs in the Vedic literature, and which is the earliest mention of the word (\*18); and it means the same thing as the word Kinnara. It then occurs in the MAHABHARATA (\*19), and in other literary works. The artists came later; the earliest representation in art can be found as belonging to not earlier than the 4th or the 3rd century B.C.; it is found in the Gandhara School of Art. It was thence followed by the artists of the Gupta period, and of the Chalukya and the Pallava periods as stated already; and the same conception about the Kinnara (as given by those artists) has been held up even to the present day. Thus it will be seen that the artists are not responsible for giving us this unnatural picture of a being held so much in reverence, and classed as one among the Gandharvas and others. So it is the writers who can be held responsible for presenting such a hybrid picture of the creature. The point is where did the writers get inspiration from for creating such a creature? We shall now see that.

□ THE SOURCE OF THE WRITERS' INSPIRATION: HYBRID DEITIES OF THE ANCIENT WORLD

If it is once accepted that the Kinnara is not a natural creature as we all are, the hybrid aspect of it must have some tangible explanation; and we get one.

It is a well known fact that in the ancient world the population of any inhabited part of the world was very very scanty; and that too



was scattered over different areas in small number. People formed themselves into small groups or clans which were formed because of blood relationship or because of common interest; and to distinguish one clan from the other they followed a system, and the same system seems to have been followed in different parts of the world. This was a system in which one clan was distinguished from the other by some totem, that is by some natural object especially an animal; and different animals such as a serpent, a scorpion, a goat, a bull, a tiger etc. formed the symbols or signs by which these clans and their people came to be known. Thus there were serpent-men, scorpion-men, bull-men, tiger-men fish-men, crocodile-men and so on. The signs by which these people were known, were often displayed on banners or standards, and these were put up conspicuously during the times of war and fights and quarrels to distinguish them one from the other; or they were put up during the period of their migration. The Jews thus carried banners, or rods, on which serpent was displayed (\*20).

In course of time however these animals became the object of worship; temples were erected in their honour, or shrines were put up. And after a very very long period when these tribes and clans were completely wiped out and forgotten traditions and myths gathered around them and their names, and they were remembered by their totemic names only. Thus the Nagas or serpent-men, Meenas or Matsyas or fish-men, Makaras or crocodile-men, Aleenas or Squirrel-men (Rv. vii 18.7), etc. were known only by their totemic names. And now to differentiate one tribe from the other a peculiar method was adopted; it was to represent the tribe in a hybrid form, i.e. to exhibit the tribe in such a way (of course in pictures and drawings) that the member of the tribe is shown by the head of the animal taken as a totem by that tribe. Thus the tribe is now shown in the half-animal and half-human form. In course of time the same hybrid form of the tribe was transferred to the deity of the tribe; and we get deities such as cat-headed deity, hawk-headed deity, typhoon-headed deity and so on.

It is the considered opinion of the scholars that the representation in hybrid form as found at Mohenjo-daro and at Harappa is borrowed possibly from the Babylonians and the Assyrians.

Among the Babylonian and the Assyrian relics of the past we meet with human-headed lions.

□ SOME OTHER MOTIVES FOR HYBRID REPRESENTATION OF CREATURES

But the hybrid form of an animal besides being used for representing a tribe or its deity, has been in vogue in ancient time for some other reasons also. The motive employed cannot be judged today, but such hybrid forms are found mentioned at different places. They may have their origin in the act of pointing out humorously or otherwise the inherent qualities of a person or thing connected with it: thus king Midas of Phrygia, Asia Minor, is shown with an Ass's head. Sphinx is shown with the head and the breast of a woman, the body of a lion, tail of a serpent, wings of a bird and possessing human voice. Hecate, the Greek Goddess, is represented with three heads, one of a horse, the second of a dog and the third of a lion. Mermaids were fabulous marine creatures partly women and partly fish. Persian Div's were cat-headed men.

□ HOW OLD IS THE PRACTICE OF REPRESENTING CREATURES IN HYBRID FORMS?

But how old is the practice of representing creatures in hybrid forms? At a time it was the general opinion among scholars that it is India where the practice of representing deities in hybrid form seems to be very old; but now as knowledge has advanced especially due to archaeological discoveries, such hybrid forms have been found in abundance among the Egyptian relics of ancient time; and they have been found in other parts of Asia and Europe too; and many of these belong to the 3rd and the 2nd millennium B.C. .

Now however it has been discovered that representation in hybrid forms belonged to a very very distant past; since it is found drawn painted on walls in the Cavern of TROIS-FRERE in France. There we find figures which are the combination of man, horse and bison.



□ DIFFERENT PRINCIPLES UNDER-LYING THE CONCEPTION OF HYBRID FORMATION IN INDIA AND IN THE WEST: ORIGIN OF THE HORSE-CULT IN INDIA

The hybrid creation of deities outside India is however altogether different in principle from the one found in India. Take for example the type of Kinnara and the one of the Indian deities viz. Gajanana or Nrisinha. Here the only common feature between the two is that they possess a semi-human and semi-animal body; but in the case of the Indian gods the animal does not represent any clan of which it is a totem; but that is not the case of the hybrid representation in the West. There are a number of reasons for which the hybrid forms are employed. Some of these are given below :—

- 1) They are used to indicate a particular clan as said above,
- 2) they indicate the fusion of two or more cultures,
- 3) they have their origin in the imperfect knowledge of the deity indicated by the animal's head,
- 4) they are employed for decorative purposes, and
- 5) they are born out of sheer fancy and imagination of the artist.

The idea underlying the hybrid form of a Kinnara can very well fit in one of the above reasons; for it may represent a cult or a clan or a tribe. But the motive for using the hybrid form of an Indian god does not at all fit in the above reasons. Gajanana's elephant-head or Nrisinha's lion-head does not indicate a clan, or fusion of some other culture. It is there to show figuratively that Gajanana possessed the exceptional qualities of an elephant, or Nrisinha possessed the qualities of a lion. The hybrid formation of these deities does not, it seems, convey any other sense. Moreover Gajanana is one, Nrisinha is one; the KINNARAS however are spoken of as many; and they lived in a region beyond the bounds of the Indian territory; even now some remnants of them may be found in the Himalayan region as a backward people, as Adivasis

under the name of 'kana-ur' or 'kanaur' (\*21). That the KINNARAS represented the 'Horse-Cult' will be clear from what follows in this article. The question however is: Are there any traces of the 'Horse-Cult' in India? The answer is obviously in the negative. ASHVAMEDHA or the horse sacrifice does not represent the horse-cult; there is nothing of a cult in it. Then how does the Kinnara happen to be there on the Indian soil? It has found a place among the Indian gods too.

There are two possibilities for its appearance in India. Wherever the Aryans went after their EXODUS from the land of their own for whatever reasons, they carried with them two things: i) the Cult of the Sun, and ii) the Horse. So when they first came to India riding on their horse, those among the Indians who saw them first, had a very strange spectacle before them: a four-footed strong animal never seen before showing the head of a human being; for they could see clearly the head of a strong bearded man, but not that of the horse; perhaps it might have turned its head; and they might have ejaculated 'Can it be a human being?' (किं नरोऽयम्? किं पुरुषोऽयम्?). The names KINNARA and KIMPURUSHA thus passed from lip to lip, and went on from generation to generation; and the name KINNARA came to be applied for an Aryan riding on a horse. The word KINNARA was perhaps more easily pronounced than the word KIMPURUSHA and hence it became current.

The explanation given above is of course conjectural, a mere guess, but one of the plausible explanations of the word that can be offered. That the use of the word did show a doubt in the mind of the people that saw the creature first, is clear.

The meaning of the word 'kim' in Kimpurusha or Kinnara as 'ugly', 'bad', 'horrible to look at' etc., as suggested by some scholars, does not stand to reason as the Aryans for whom the word was used were a fair race, and hence they did not deserve the name 'ugly'.

The other reason that follows is of course more weighty and convincing, but in that case no explanation is found as to why the creature was called a Kinnara or a Kimpurusha.



We have already said above that wherever the Aryans went they carried with them the Cult of the Sun and the Horse. And with the horse also went the Cult of it; and they brought both the cults in India too. The Cult of the Sun got a permanent place in the heart of the Indians, but the Cult of the horse was in the course of time forgotten; it did not thrive here because it did not find a fair field; only some indistinct, unintelligible account of the cult lingered behind; people had only a blurred picture of the cult before their mind's eye; the poets and the bards had to reconstruct this picture with their own imagination. They had before them somewhat better pictures of the Gandharvas and the Apsarases, both of which belonged to the same region as was assigned to the KINNARAS. And out of the horse-cult, though now the cult was dead, the 'horse' had remained and had become a common animal. The bards and the poets therefore seem to have connected the Kinnaras with the Gandharvas and the Apsarases, and endowed them with their special qualities, viz. those of music and dance, and were invested with their usual duty of attending upon the gods, thus giving them a place on par with the Gandharvas and the Apsarases among Indian gods.

#### □ THE HORSE - CULT IN EUROPE :

But what was this Horse-Cult? And where was this cult widely in vogue? It is definitely not found in any part of the Western Asian countries, or in India. It was however widely spread all over Europe at one time in the prehistoric period. It was popularly known as the CULT OF EPONA. There were deities, saints, cities and other place-names connected with and named after the 'horse'. The horse was regarded as a worshipful animal. DEMETER, the Greek goddess, can be cited as an example. The primitive character of this goddess was presented in certain regions of Greece, notably in Arcadia, where the goddess was represented with the horse's head; and she was shown as surrounded by serpents and other ferocious beasts; she had in one hand a dolphin, a kind of fish, and in the other a dove. The sphere of her influence reached even the underworld.

The fact that she was shown surrounded by serpents and other ferocious beasts may very well be interpreted as that there was

hostile element all around her. The horse-worshippers had come among the serpent-worshippers (अहि, 'नाग', 'सर्प'). The horse worshippers were among other hostile tribes too. They however had made friendship with the 'fish' or fish-men (मीन, 'मत्स्य'); the horse-worshippers were however strongly opposed by the serpent-worshippers. The horse-goddess represented the Cult of the Aryans; and wherever these Aryans went they were anxious for 'peace'; the 'dove' was an emblem of peace as shown by the Bible. The Aryans desired a peaceful atmosphere. The fusion of the Aryan culture with other cultures elsewhere is a proof to show that the Aryans were ever ready for compromise, for peace.

Among the Irish and the Welsh goddesses too there were some goddesses which are identified as horse-goddesses. MACHA of Ulster and MEDB of the Welsh tradition can be cited as the best examples of the type (\*22)

According to some scholars the horse-goddess emerges as another manifestation of the Mother Goddess.

Among some GAULISH statuary we come across statues of a goddess seated on horse. This represents the CULT OF EPONA.

The CULT OF EPONA was widely spread all over Europe, from Spain to Eastern Europe, and from Northern Italy to Britain; and this is perhaps the reason why we find mention of the horse goddess in the Irish and the Welsh traditions.

From the fact that the CULT OF EPONA was so widely spread in Europe, we have reason to believe that its original home must have been somewhere in Europe. No trace of such a cult is found in Persia, Babylonia or Arabia. Horse deities are conspicuous by their absence there; and India cannot be the home of the horse-cult as the very conception about the deity KINNARA (if it is taken as a horse deity) is based on doubtful knowledge; since to some the KINNARA is a MAN-HORSE creature, while to others it is a MAN-BIRD creature; moreover it is never considered as a full fledged deity. The 'horse' itself is an intruder on the Indian soil.



So the KINNARA is originally a horse deity brought into India by the Aryans. But since the home of the 'horse' itself and of the cult, was the region of the Eurasian Steppe, the cult did not find favour with the Indian soil, and was neglected, and in the long run it was altogether forgotten; only the name KINNARA remained. It naturally created a doubtful atmosphere around the very name KINNARA or KIMPURUSHA since its very history was altogether forgotten.

#### □ EUROPE THE HOME OF THE HORSE-CULT

That the horse-cult was very popular in Europe can be seen not only from the fact that the Cult of Epona was widely prevalent in various countries of Europe, but also from the fact that the horse was connected with place-names and even with the names of saints, and with various other things. We know of cities in Egypt connected with an 'eagle', and cities and other place-names in India connected with 'serpent' or 'Naga', even so there were cities named after a 'horse' in Europe: CANTERBURY is such a place-name. 'Kentyre', a village deity in Scotland, is too named after a horse; and St. Cheron means the chief of the horse-cult (\*23). 'Centaur' (Fr, Gr. kentauros) were fabled monsters of Thessaly and they are shown in half-man, half-horse form.

#### □ WHEN WAS THE HORSE-CULT FIRST INTRODUCED ?

Since when is the horse-cult in vogue? Of course its introduction cannot be earlier than the 3rd millennium B.C., as the horse is said to have first treaded on the civilised land at a period between 3250 and 2700 B.C., and the horse went to different parts of the world with the Aryan emigrants. The HITTITES of Asia Minor are said to have been responsible for making the horse familiar with the Iranians, Mesopotamians and the Egyptians. The horse came to India afterwards. The people of the Indus Valley Civilization were hardly acquainted with the horse; this can be very well realised from the fact that the remains of the horse are absent among the finds of Mohenjo Daro and Harappa. The horse is therefore altogether foreign to India, being imported from abroad. So the Kinnara myth has its origin in a foreign land and so its character has become so much enigmatic.

We have so far tried to reveal the real character of the mysterious and fabulous creature and to unravel its enigmatic character.





## The Kinnaras

### REFERENCES AND NOTES

- 1 G.K.I.I. pl. xix.
- 2 S.I.G.G. see fig. 154.
- 3 E.H.I. p. 266.
- 4 S.I.G.G. fig. 154.
- 5 Man. ch. 58.  
It says : चरणं पशुसमानं  
चोर्ध्वकाय तु नराभम् वदनं  
गरुडभावम् । बाहुकौ च पक्षयुक्तौ ।  
मुकुटं कमलयुक्तम् । पुष्पसंछायं  
वर्णम् परितः करुणवीणम् ।  
किन्नरस्य तु स्वरूपम् ॥
- 6 Vach. defines किंपुरुष and किन्नर  
as follows :  
किंपुरुष :- स च अश्वाकारजघनः  
नराकारमुखः ।  
किन्नर :- स तु अश्वाकारवदनः  
नराकारजघनः ।  
इति तयोः भेदः ॥
- 7 V.D. Pu., Bk. ii. ch. 42, 13-15.
- 8 Quoted from A. K. Coomarswamy's M.S.A., pp. 80 ff
- 9 Ak. i. 11, i. 71.
- 10 K. (R). viii. 64.
- 11 A. Pu. ch. 51; “वीणाहस्ताः  
किन्नराः स्युः” ।
- 12 K. (Ku). i. 11; i. 14; iii. 38;  
v. 56; vi. 39.
- 13 M. Sv. iv. 38.
- 14 K. (see चंद्रापीडस्य  
किन्नरमिथुनानुसरणम् ।
- 15 शब्दकल्पद्रुम locates the  
किंपुरुषवर्णं between the हेमकूट  
Mountain and the Himalayas
- 16 S. P. Br. xi. 5.1-4.
- 17 As quoted by A. B. Keith in  
R.P.V.U. p. 104 (n. 1);  
B.C.L.C. Vol. ii, pp. 222, 223.
- 18 Ait. Br. ii. 8; S.P. Br. i. 2,3,9;  
vii. 5.2-32. Yv. xxx.16; T. Br.  
iii. 4.12.1; (किंपुरुष is taken in  
the sense of an ‘ape’, a con-  
temptible man, a savage man.)
- 19 M.Bh. (sabha) 29.1-5; (Aranya)  
6; (किन्नरS are grouped with  
वानर, राक्षस, and किंपुरुष with  
शलभ, सिंह, व्याघ्र etc.)
- 20 B. (Genesis) viii
- 21 H.G. (see under ‘Kana-ur’).
- 22 E.M.L.I. p. 247.
- 23 D.C.I. p. 410, fig. 245.

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